

A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

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Illustrator:
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CONTENTS



Prologue

Chapter One: Let the Event Begin!

Chapter Two: The Villagers of Alf

Chapter Three: A Change in the Guardian Beast

Chapter Four: The Demon in the Trees

Chapter Five: The Archdemon Glasya-Labolas

Chapter Six: Reinforcements and a Fight to the Death

Chapter Seven: The End of the Event and Its Aftermath

Epilogue



A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

Prologue

“Not much longer to go now.”

It had been one hour since the details of the event had been announced. The five of us, having taken care of all our chores, were now on the farm, awaiting the start of the event. I reread the invitation I had received, heart thumping with anticipation. I had assumed until now that the Martial Arts Tournament was the only event going on, but it seemed the devs had not forgotten about us crafter types.

“Many adventurers, mercenaries, and crafters gather in the Town of Beginnings during the Martial Arts Tournament. Because of that, the neighboring villages have fewer workers during this period, causing various jobs to stagnate. We kindly ask those of you who aren’t participating in the tournament to lend a helping hand to the Village of Alf.”

That probably meant there would be plenty of fetch quests available, right? Not that the details really mattered—I was simply happy that I could take part.

“Mm.”

“...”

My gnome, Olto, and my Tree Nymph, Sakura, paced back and forth restlessly beside me, hardly able to contain their excitement.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear the Honey Bear and my Gray Squirrel, Rick, were warming up a few paces away. I could understand if they were bending, stretching, or doing neck rolls to warm up their muscles, but—as adorable as it was, was there any point in Rick doing a standing side split on top of Bear Bear’s head? I supposed they, too, were just as excited as the others.

“We’ve got enough items for the trip, and the farm’s all taken care of for now.”

According to the announcement, time would be sped up for all participants. Therefore, although the event would last for an entire week, only one day would have passed in-game upon our return. Thankfully, I wouldn’t have to worry about our farm falling into ruin while we were gone.

“Ten more seconds to go. Nine, eight, seven...”

“Mmm!”

“...!”

“Growl!”

“Chree!”

...Wait, was that on purpose, Rick?

“Two, one...”

“The event will be starting now. You will be transported to the event area shortly.”

As soon as the in-game announcement ended, the five of us were engulfed in white light, and the scenery before us shifted dramatically. Gone was the farm that we tended to with painstaking effort each day, replaced by rows of unfamiliar houses.

“Is this the village?”

It seemed like we had been transported to a public square in some village. Countless other players jostled around us, no doubt also here on the same mission. This had to be the Village of Alf. *Now then, time to check on my companions.*

“Everyone here? Roll call!”

“Mm!”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

Olto went first, followed by the rest as four pairs of hands shot up into the air in order. Good, my monsters had all arrived in one piece... *Uh-oh.* Our little roll call seemed to have garnered quite a bit of attention. Guess I got carried away. I ushered everyone to the edge of the square, away from the stares—not that it made much of a difference; there weren’t that many Tamers to begin with.

Ding-dong.

Another notification: it was a new message from the devs.

“Thank you very much for your participation. Please refer to the following details regarding this event.”

The message contained numerous important details. To sum it up briefly:

Our group had been assigned to Server No. 29. Players would be awarded points during the event for completing various actions. At the end of the event, cumulative server points would be calculated, with each server in competition with the others. Players would also receive an individual ranking within their server. Basically, this event was both a collective effort and an individual competition. *Talk about a nasty setup.* You had to work together as a team in order to beat other servers, but you also had to work on racking up points individually. However, if you tried to sabotage your rivals’ efforts too much, you’d end up dragging the whole server down. You had to choose whether to prioritize playing to raise your individual rank or

working together with other members to win as a whole. Each player was likely to have a different opinion on what strategy was best, which would no doubt be a point of conflict.

“Hmm, which route shall I go...?”

I decided to play it safe and work on cooperating with other players whenever possible to gain points. That seemed like the option most people would opt for, and I doubted I would make it into the top spots as a solo player anyway.

“Let’s see, what next?”

I looked up from my screen and cast a casual glance around my surroundings. Several players were leaving the square already. These were the proactive ones: the competitive ones, the independent ones, the highly inquisitive. One man, however, in direct contrast, stood bellowing in the middle of the square.

“Listen up, everyone!”

Was he trying to act as our leader? To be honest, I was hoping to avoid working in groups while I was gaming. While I didn’t mind giving others a hand, banding together under one person was another thing entirely. That being said, I was curious to hear what this self-proclaimed leader had to say. I stood outside the slowly growing circle, listening in. Many other players seemed to have the same idea—the crowd in front of the man was growing by the minute.

In the midst of the circle was a purple-haired human astride a butt-ugly horse. When I say ugly, I mean absolutely *hideous*. I was starting to warm to this handsome fella, who seemed in high spirits atop his steed. As if many of the others felt the same way, the crowd’s gazes appeared to be surprisingly forgiving—or at least, lukewarm.

“Greetings! I am Siegfried, the wandering knight!” the man exclaimed.

Whoa! That’s some confidence! So this was the famous knight role-player. It did fit the game’s setting, though, and he had his role down pat. Normally, I would’ve cringed at such an embarrassing display of confidence, but in Siegfried’s case, I surprisingly found myself admiring him. He never broke character for even a moment, his efforts so concerted that even his mannerisms seemed fully natural. He blended so seamlessly into the world one could have mistaken him for an NPC. His performance was so impressive I almost didn’t mind his horse’s looks. Judging from how no one seemed rattled by this scene, I guessed that Siegfried’s reputation preceded him; he definitely made a powerful first impression. Where had I heard his name, though? It sounded awfully familiar...

“Those who haven’t met me before may know me by the name of the Purple-Haired Adventurer.”

That’s it! He was the third unique titleholder, besides Akari and

me! I remembered her mentioning that he role-played as a knight! The name Purple-Haired Adventurer suited him well; true to his name, he had wavy purple hair and a handsome, princely look about him. I gazed at him, impressed as Siegfried continued his impassioned speech, which turned out to be far more reasonable than I had expected. Since he himself was more interested in winning the server battle than aiming for the top as a solo player, he urged those of us who shared his opinion to actively cooperate with one another and those who didn't to refrain from sabotaging others and to share information wherever possible. That was the gist of his request.

Although some players scoffed and left the square the minute he suggested sharing information with each other, a large number of players remained, clearly intent on cooperating with him. I was one of those who stayed behind. Siegfried had won me over, enough that I now planned to share whatever useful information I found without keeping it to myself. Because he took his role-playing seriously, his words seemed genuine and free from sarcasm. I even felt envious of him; he seemed to be enjoying this game more than anybody else. He wasn't criticizing anyone for playing solo either, and people were free to refuse cooperation if they weren't interested. As assertive as he was, he hadn't forgotten to show consideration for others who felt differently.

Siegfried's words had apparently resonated with a renowned crafter and the leader of a famous party, and the three of them got together and began discussing their plans from here on out. I neither had the courage nor the motivation to join the discussion and share my opinion, so I decided to go solo, merely cooperating with others when the opportunity arose.

"Time to make a move, guys."

Though we would be spending an entire week in this village, that only amounted to six hours in real life. Consequently, logging out wouldn't be necessary during the event. Actually, it would be terrible if we had to log out, for although we would be able to do so in the event of an emergency, we wouldn't be able to rejoin the event if we did. That being said, it wasn't possible to be on the move the whole time. During the event, players were required to lie down on a mattress or sleeping bag and get at least six hours of sleep a day.

"Gotta sort out our sleeping situation first."

"Mm-mm!"

Olto, who seemed more hyper than usual, began leading the way. Rick rode on my shoulder while Bear Bear held my right hand and Sakura held my left. It sure was nice to walk hand in hand with everyone.

Chapter One: Let the Event Begin!

A thought occurred to me as we were searching for an inn: would we be able to stay there? As Olto and Sakura were humanoid monsters, I doubted they would pose any problems, but what about Rick and Bear Bear, who were animals? This *was* a game after all, so I supposed it wouldn't matter, but... Also, would we be charged for all five of us? In that case, that could cause more of a financial strain than I thought.

"Mm-mm?"

As I was turning the problem over in my mind, Olto suddenly left the main street and wandered off into a side alley.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going, buddy?!"

"Mm-mm-mm!"

"After Olto, everyone!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl growl!"

"...!"

The rest of us quickly chased Olto, who ran a few paces in front of us.

"Olto!"

"Mm-mm!"

After a few minutes of the chase, Olto came to a sudden halt.

"Finally... Was wondering when you'd stop..."

"Mm."

Olto had come to a standstill in front of a wooden wall. The wall was slightly lower than my height, but for Olto, it had to be quite daunting. Unfazed, he kicked himself off the ground and latched his fingers onto the top of the wall, trying to pull himself over it. Something on the other side appeared to be calling to him. I lifted him up by his armpits, peering over the wall at the same time.

"A farm, eh?"

"Mm!"

A vegetable garden lay on the other side of the wall. Only Olto could have spotted a farm from this distance. I guessed spotted wasn't the right word; *sensed* was more like it. Honestly, it was more of a superpower at this point—something only a gnome was capable of. A lanky old man was watering the vegetables on his own, walking unsteadily as he tried to balance the two buckets dangling from both

sides of the pole he carried across his shoulders. *Careful, old man!* Oh no, he fell! There goes all that water he fetched. Seeing his struggles, I couldn't help but call out to him.

"Hey! You okay there?" I yelled. I couldn't just leave him like that, could I?

"Hello, are you a traveler? Not to worry. Just had a little tumble, that's all," the old man replied as he stood up. He didn't sound very convincing, however, especially as his legs were trembling. Clearly, I had to step in.

"Would you like us to help you?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't want to inconvenience you, my dear boy," the old man turned down my offer apologetically. I wasn't willing to back down, though, not after what I'd just witnessed. I decided to be a little more forward.

"It's no trouble at all. We're used to farming anyway."

"Hmm..."

"If anything, my companions love farming."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

Though still apologetic, the old man seemed relieved as he bowed his head.

"In that case, I suppose I'll take you up on your offer."

"Leave it to us. Let's go, Sakura and Olto."

"Mm-mm!"

"..."

The whole objective of this event was to help the villagers, so I wasn't wrong in assisting him, was I? It didn't seem like I'd triggered a quest, though, so I likely wouldn't get any points or rewards, but... Oh well, at the very least, I could ask him some questions later. You could never have too much information about the village. For now, I turned to the old man for instructions.

"Which areas should we water?"

"From here to there."

Seriously? That was a lot of land to cover; it was equivalent to roughly four squares on my farm. I didn't see any wells nearby either.

"Where do you fetch your water from?"

"There's a farm pond a little ways from here."

What have I gotten myself into? I was already regretting my decision to help the old man. I had gone into this thinking things would be similar to our farm, but it hadn't occurred to me that not every farm would have a well beside it.

"This way," the old man beckoned to us.

"Mm-mm."

"..."

We followed the old man's lead as he trudged to the farm pond. For a man of his age, his gait was surprisingly steady. Farming might be too labor-intensive for him, but he didn't seem to have any problems with day-to-day activities.

"I usually leave the farming to my son, but since he left for the Town of Beginnings to watch the Martial Arts Tournament, I've no choice but to look after it while he's gone."

Ah. So this was what they meant by the village having fewer workers during this period.

"Sounds rough."

"Well, he did say I had only to water the vegetables, so it's not that hard. I should probably do some weeding as well, but that's a little too much for an old geezer like me."

The farm pond the old man led us to was much larger than I thought. It was about twenty-five meters across and was surrounded by overgrown, probably insect-infested grass. It looked like the kind of pond you often see in the countryside. We submerged our buckets in the pond, filling them up with water.

"This is pretty heavy..." I groaned as I tried to balance the pole across my shoulders, wobbling a bit as I did so. To be honest, I wasn't much better than the old man. Was I actually that scrawny? Unable to stand seeing me struggle, Olto thumped his chest and gazed up into my eyes as if to say, *Leave it to me!*

"Mm-mm!"

"I'll leave it to you, then."

Very well. If you insist, buddy. To an outsider, I probably looked like some cruel adult forcing a child to do hard labor. I had to hand it to Olto, though. The minute he took the pole from me, he dashed back to the farm without so much as wobbling, becoming a mere speck within seconds. He really was full of energy, if I did say so myself.

"Can you two manage too?"

"...!"

"Growl growl!"

Sakura and Bear Bear seemed to have no problems either. Like Olto, they thumped their chests and nodded confidently in reply.

"Is that the only pole you have, sir?"

"Reckon I have a few more in the barn if you look for them."

"Mind if we borrow them? We should be able to get the job done faster that way."

"Of course, of course."

After waiting for Olto to return, we headed to the old man's house to borrow a few more buckets and poles. The house was a short walk from the farm and of a rather impressive size, with a plain exterior that made good use of the wood's natural grain. There was a certain

warmth to its unpretentious appearance.

"I used to live with my two sons and their wives, but my eldest is currently in the Town of Beginnings, and my youngest has moved out," the old man explained. He was also a widower, and I could see a portrait of his deceased wife inside one of the rooms. I prayed to the portrait, offering my respects. Even though this was just a game, it was only polite to show common courtesy. Olto and the others also followed my lead and began praying. At first, I wondered whether they actually got the symbolism, but from the solemn looks on their faces, they seemed to understand perfectly.

"Thank you."

"Sorry, perhaps we should've asked you first."

"Not at all. I'm sure my wife is happy too. Come along, the barn's this way."

The door at the edge of the kitchen led to the barn. Amongst the farming tools were various piles of knickknacks. We rummaged through the piles, pushing aside various tools as we did so, and managed to find two balancing poles. There were plenty of buckets too. This would likely make our work more efficient.

"How about you, Bear Bear and Sakura?"

Sakura possessed Arboriculture, while Bear Bear only had Cultivation and Beekeeping skills. Despite their beaming confidence, I had my reservations. What if you needed Farming skills to carry stuff on your shoulders? However, my worries turned out to be unwarranted. Both Bear Bear and Sakura had no problem balancing the poles on their shoulders. I decided to fill one wooden bucket myself and carry some water to the farm. Together, we made several trips between the farm and the pond and watered the vegetables. The whole process was incredibly labor-intensive. I now felt immensely grateful for the well on our farm.

"We're done."

After about an hour's work, we finished watering the crops and weeding the farm. If the old man had attempted all of that on his own, it might have taken him the entire day.

"Thanks, son. You've been a great help."

"Don't mention it. We oughta help each other when times are tough."

"I know it's hardly proper compensation, but would you like to stay for a cup of tea?"

Tea, eh? I could definitely use some rest, plus I was curious to see what kind of tea he would offer me. It would be great if I could acquire some new tea in the process.

"Gladly."

We moved to the old man's house where I was served herbal tea,

much to my surprise. Apparently, it was a staple in this village. Perhaps I should've waited to post my information in the forums; people would most likely know how to make herbal tea once this event was over.

"I owe you all."

"Seriously, it's nothing."

"Thank you," the old man bowed. *Maybe I ought to take this opportunity to ask him something.* That would be sufficient payment for me. Even better if he gave me a referral.

"Does this village have any inns?"

"Inns? Oh, yes. Just a small one, though."

"Huh? Just one?"

"We don't get many tourists, after all. There's just the one inn. It has about five rooms altogether."

That was hardly enough for all the players currently in town.

"Really? Is there anywhere else I can stay...?"

"Hmm. I think they sell tents at the general store. I suppose you could buy one and camp in the square."

"Do you know how much they cost, by the way?"

"What? Do you plan on staying here?"

"Yes, for a week or so."

"In that case, you can stay at my place. I'd appreciate your help on the farm, after all."

That didn't sound like a bad idea. Work on the farm could be done in an hour or so, and I'd much rather sleep in a bed than a tent.

"I have a spare room. What do you say?"

Before I said yes, however, I had to confirm something.

"Can my companions stay at your house too?"

This was something I refused to compromise on. If he were to say Rick and Bear Bear had to sleep in the barn, I would have to decline his offer. To my relief, the old man nodded with a smile.

"Of course. They're free to use the beds as well."

Thank goodness he was willing to put all of us up. Having beds for everyone was a nice touch.

"Thank you for your kind offer."

"Ha ha ha. The more, the merrier. I'm counting on you lot. Now then, let me show you to your room."

The old man led us to a room with four beds.

"You're free to use this room as you please."

"Nice place."

The beds looked soft and comfortable, and the room was decorated with elegant, neutral-colored furniture. I sat down on one bed to test it out and found that it was as soft as a down comforter. This would be a delight to sleep on. Just then, a window popped up. It

seemed like you could set how many hours you planned to sleep. Under normal circumstances, you'd be logged out of the game if you went to sleep, but during the event, time would pass automatically for the duration you set. Apparently, the game would adjust how your body sensed time, making hours feel like mere seconds. That was certainly useful.

"This room belonged to my youngest son and his wife. I've left the furniture as it is."

"Thank you."

"There's still time until dinner. Plan on doing anything?"

"Huh? You mean I get to have dinner too?"

"Of course. I invited you over, so it's only right that I cook for you as well."

What a stroke of luck! I might be able to eat food that I hadn't yet tried in-game.

"Thanks. Don't worry about food for my monsters though. I'll take care of that," I added, lest I forget.

"You sure? Well, I suppose they don't eat the same food as us, so it's only fair."

"Mm-hm."

"Very well. I'll just prepare food for you then, young man."

"Call me Yuto."

"Pleased to meet you, Yuto. I'm Cayenne."

Now that we had secured our lodgings, we decided to take a tour around the Village of Alf.

"We'll be off now," I bid farewell to Cayenne.

"Okey-dokey. Take care," he waved us off as we left his house. We were greeted by the sight of a quaint country village, with wooden dwellings lining the unpaved road, and farms, meadows, and woods sprawling on every side. Olto and Bear Bear held my hand while Sakura trailed behind us with Rick perched on her shoulder. My monsters seemed to relish the peaceful atmosphere, skipping and laughing all the while. During our week in Alf, we'd be able to spend more time together. That alone made joining the event worth it.

"Wonder if there's a general store around here. Keep your eyes peeled for one, will you?"

"Mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...♪"

Four pairs of hands shot up and saluted in reply. As we strolled through the village, my monsters appeared to spot something of interest.

“Mm-mm!”

“Hey, you see a store?”

“Mmm!”

“Growl!”

Olto and Bear Bear pulled my hand and guided me to a small shop. It looked like a normal house from the outside, I would most likely have missed it if I'd been searching for it on my own. *Props to them.* I opened the door and stepped over the threshold into the cozy little shop. The shop had a variety of goods for sale, including vegetables, farming tools, weapons, and armor.

“Welcome,” a thin, grumpy-looking old woman with a stoop greeted me. Mildly speaking, she seemed the polar opposite of good-natured, the type to tell loitering customers off. I could practically hear her saying, *Hurry up and buy something and get the hell out of here!*

“Can I see your seeds and seedlings?” I asked her hesitantly.

“This way.”

Phew. Although she had a brusque way of speaking, she didn't turn me away or ignore me. I didn't find anything new among the items she showed me, though. All I found were medicinal herbs, poison hemlock, and blue acorn seedlings, as well as herbs like basil. That was mildly disappointing—I had been hoping to get items that weren't available in the Town of Beginnings. However, I did spot several unfamiliar vegetables. Being NPC shop products, they couldn't be propagated, but I decided to buy a few anyway to use for cooking. I bought five white tomatoes and ultramarine eggplants each to start with. It was my first time seeing tomatoes and eggplants in-game. The color was pretty unusual, but hopefully, they tasted good. I looked forward to trying them.

“Let's look for some other shops, shall we?”

I probably ought to ask where I can find the guild too. I was hesitant to ask the old woman about other shops since I was afraid it would imply that her selection wasn't good enough. Surely, she would tell me where the guild was, though? After all, I had purchased a few items from her.

“Excuse me. Does this village have any guilds?”

“Guilds?”

“Yes. It'd be nice if I could find a Farming Guild or Magical Beasts Guild.”

“Hmph. You really think you'd find that many guilds in a village like this? All we have is one little Adventurers' Guild.”

Fair enough. I was glad to learn that there was an Adventurers' Guild, though, as I'd probably be able to take on quests there. I asked the old lady for the location and received a curt set of directions. The guild stood facing the square we were first transported to. I made up

my mind to swing by after touring the whole village. Thanking the old lady for her help, we set off to explore the village once more.

Every now and then, I would pass by a villager on the street. I made sure to greet them, all the while keeping my eyes peeled for other shops I could visit. To be honest, it was more of a leisurely stroll than a search. It was fun walking through the quaint village with my buddies, taking in a scenery which was completely unlike that of the Town of Beginnings. After about an hour of walking and covering around half the village, we finally came upon another store.

“Hi,” I greeted the shopkeeper.

“Welcome!”

“Is this a grocery?” I asked. Besides green peaches and blue acorns, the shop also had purple persimmons on display, a fruit I’d never seen before. This seemed like the perfect place to buy food for Olto and Bear Bear.

“Yep! Our fruit’s all freshly picked! We won’t be getting any new produce for a while, so now’s your chance to buy some! Once we’ve sold our current stock, we’ll be closing shop for the time being!”

“What? No produce? For how long?”

Just when I had my sights set on buying fruit from this shop! Even if I bought their whole stock, there were only two peaches and two persimmons left, which was hardly enough to last me a week. Would I have to feed Olto honey dumplings instead?

“A week. My pops owns an orchard, which is where this fruit comes from. Unfortunately, he’s gone off to the Town of Beginnings for the week, so I can’t get any produce until he returns,” the shopkeeper explained. Apparently, they didn’t possess Arboriculture, so they left the growing to their father while they took care of the business side.

“Hm? Wait a minute...”

An idea had just occurred to me. Items sold at NPC shops couldn’t be propagated, which obviously included these purple persimmons. However, what about items *grown* on NPC-owned farms? Supposing I harvested them myself? Wouldn’t I be able to propagate them in that case?

“Thing is, my tamed monsters have Arboriculture skills. Shall I help you look after the orchard?” I asked, awaiting the shopkeeper’s response with bated breath. I wasn’t sure whether they’d trust me, seeing as we’d only just met. However, I needn’t have worried.

“Really? You would? That’d be great!” they replied exuberantly.

“No biggie. I figured you could use a hand.”

“Hmm, how shall I repay you...?”

“In that case, mind if I keep some of the fruit I harvest?”

“That all you want?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, feel free to take any four fruits of your choosing a day.”

Four a day, eh? Purple persimmons cost 300 G apiece; getting four for free each day was quite a bargain. The prospect of obtaining a rare fruit excited me, even if I couldn’t propagate it.

“Gotcha, thanks. Where’s your orchard?”

“Gimme a second. I’ll point it out to you now.”

The shopkeeper marked the orchard on the map for me. To my surprise, I discovered that it was right next to old man Cayenne’s farm. Given that plenty of farms were concentrated in that district, I supposed it wasn’t too much of a coincidence.

“There’s an item box in the orchard, so just place the fruit you harvested in there.”

“Got it.”

I was relieved that I didn’t have to come all the way here to deliver the harvested fruit, as the store was quite far from the orchard.

“Well, we’d better get going.”

“All right. I’m counting on you!” The shopkeeper waved us goodbye as we left the store. It looked like both my tamed monsters and I could look forward to some extravagant meals during the event.

After leaving the greengrocer, we continued walking around the village, greeting other players and NPCs on the way. I was especially excited to know what the other players were like. Since these were the people who had left the square immediately without listening to Siegfried’s speech, I was expecting them to be rapacious and intimidating, but thankfully, they were all much friendlier than I had imagined. Some of them even smiled and waved at us.

The village only had five shops, all with the same sort of items you could find in the Town of Beginnings. The only unfamiliar item I had encountered so far was the purple persimmon at the grocer. After a round tour of the village, we finally arrived at the Adventurers’ Guild. *Took you long enough, you say?* If I was being perfectly honest, I was actually a bit intimidated. I rarely had a chance to visit Adventurers’ Guilds.

“Damn, it’s busy.”

“Busy” was an understatement: the crowd looked like they were on the verge of rioting in front of the minuscule building. Of course, it was still several times larger than the houses in the village, but at the end of the day, it was nothing compared to the guild in town. Its maximum capacity appeared to be thirty people at a time. Fifty-odd players prowled outside the entrance of the building impatiently, unable to enter. The guild was far too small for the number of players. While they each appeared to be waiting their turn, there was no sense of order or queue whatsoever, with people shoving and shouting at

each other.

“D-Definitely too rowdy a scene for me.”

“Mm?”

“Chirp?”

“You’ll all be trampled to death, I’m sure of it.”

“Growl.”

“...”

Due to the game’s harassment block, players were unable to have physical contact unless they befriended each other; you couldn’t so much as shake hands otherwise. Thanks to those strict measures, there was no need to worry about actually being trampled to death. Still, judging from the state of the crowd, it looked like people *could* move if you pushed them hard enough. While you wouldn’t sustain any damage, it seemed like you’d still feel a slight impact upon being shoved. Seriously, was it possible for them to cooperate with one another when they were in such a foul mood? If the number of quests was limited, people would probably fight over who would get to do which task, and they’d surely try to bring each other down. Was this what the devs had intended? Although I wasn’t aiming for the top or anything, it seemed stupid for some stupid scuffle to harm our server points. Lost in my thoughts, I failed to notice Olto approaching the crowd. He seemed curious to see what they were up to.

“Mmm?”

“Get back, Olto! It’s dangerous!”

“Mm?”

I quickly tried to stop Olto, but I was a split second too late.

“Whoa!”

“Mm-mm!” Olto squealed as he collided with a large male player who’d been forced out of the jostling crowd. He rolled on the ground for about three meters before coming to a stop, looking dazed.

“Y-You okay, buddy?!”

“Mm-mm-mmm...?”

Thankfully, his HP hadn’t diminished, and he seemed unhurt otherwise. *Phew.*

“It’s pretty dangerous here.”

“...!”

“You agree, Sakura? Better get outta here, fast.”

Or so I had intended until I was distracted by the crowd of women gathering around the guy who had sent Olto flying.

“Hey! How *dare* you bump into Gnomey like that?!”

“Yes, how could you?!”

“What if he’d gotten hurt?!”

The women berated the man menacingly. At the same time, several other players, most of them also women, approached us with

concerned looks on their faces.

“Hey, is your gnome okay?” one of them asked me.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, he’s fine.”

“Thank goodness! Didn’t know you were on this server too, Silver-Haired.”

“Yay, we get to spend a whole week with Gnomey!”

Upon further questioning, I discovered that these people were fans of Olto. Apparently, watching Olto’s adorable mannerisms brought them comfort. Though I always knew Olto’s cuteness would appeal to audiences far and wide, I hadn’t expected him to be *this* popular. I also understood why my moniker, Silver-Haired, wasn’t about to lose traction any time soon. From what I could gather, I was secretly known as “Silver-Haired, owner of Gnomey” to people like them. Not that I particularly cared anymore. Few people made fun of me nowadays, and besides, it felt good to get a small taste of fame. It was a little disheartening that it was only a taste, though. I wasn’t *actually* famous...

“Thanks for looking out for Olto. Nothing to worry about, though, he’s just a little dizzy. Right, buddy?”

“Mm.”

As Olto raised his right arm to signal that he was fine, the women squealed with delight. Judging by their reactions, you’d think he was a pop star or something.

“Um, hey. Sorry about just now...”

The man who’d accidentally shoved Olto walked towards us, looking haggard. He bowed to me repeatedly, shooting me a pleading look, as the row of women behind him gave him the evil eye. *Yikes*. I was starting to feel sorry for the guy. It wasn’t as if he’d done it on purpose. There was no need for these people to be so mad at him.

“Well, no harm done, since you apologized, we’ll let bygones be bygones,” I replied. Taking pity on the man, the words had slipped out of my mouth before I knew it.

“R-Really? Thanks, thanks so much!” The man thanked me effusively, eyes brimming with tears of gratitude.

“Mm-mm!”

“No worries. Olto says he’s fine too.”

Olto patted the guy on the leg and gave him a thumbs-up, prompting the women to squeal again and the man to heave a sigh of relief.

“Mm-mm-mm.”

Hm? Olto seemed to be making another gesture. Bringing both hands close to his sides, he bent his arms in a ninety-degree angle and stood up straight, lengthening his neck.

“...?”

The other players gaped at his sudden miming, utterly at a loss. I, however, knew what he was trying to convey.

“Um, jostling each other like that is kinda dangerous, so shouldn’t you guys get in line or something? Pretty sure that’s what Olto’s trying to say.”

“Mmm!”

Bingo. Olto nodded enthusiastically in reply. That was all it took to spur the women into action. It looked like they weren’t fans of Olto for nothing. Together, the women and the dude who bumped into Olto began telling the other players to form a line. While a few were incensed by this sudden display of orderliness, most people obliged and began doing as they were told. They had probably gotten fed up with the current state of disarray themselves, and honestly not many people had the courage to oppose the menacing group of women. Some players had even begun joining the line after seeing others do so. You could really tell these were Japanese players. My monsters also pitched in to help. Being cute apparently had its perks, as most players obliged willingly after being guided by Bear Bear and Sakura. In less than five minutes, a neat line had formed in front of the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Mm-mm!” Olto beamed, a look of satisfaction on his face.

“We’ll be going now,” I told the others. I couldn’t be bothered to join the queue now, as it would likely take ages to get in. *I’ll come back another time*, I decided.

“See you later, Silver-Haired!”

“Buh-bye, Olto!”

“You’re so precious, Sakura!”

“Can I please have Bear Bear?!”

“Rick’s so fluffy!”

What was all *that* about? Did the others have fans too? I wasn’t sure whether to feel glad or intimidated...

“Huh, do those tents belong to other players?”

As I continued walking, I noticed several tents scattered across the square. It seemed like those who weren’t able to get a room at the inn had bought a tent to camp outside. Though it was still too early to lay out sleeping bags, I figured they were trying to save a spot for themselves ahead of time. However, from what I could see, the square wasn’t big enough to house that many tents. It might be a different matter if there were six people to each tent, but I was sure there were plenty of solo players and parties of only two to three members as well. Those who were really unlucky might not even have a tent to sleep in. I was certain there were at least a few unfortunate souls who had failed to find a good sleeping place. Thank goodness for old man Cayenne.

“Better check out the orchard before I forget.”

Following the map, we headed to the grocer’s orchard in preparation for tomorrow’s task. The orchard was less than a ten-minute walk from Cayenne’s farm.

“That’s closer than I thought.”

Since it was in close proximity to the farm, I would be able to use the farm pond that Cayenne had shown us earlier. Watering the trees would be no problem; Rick and I would handle the weeding while the others took care of the watering. The orchard was populated with white pears, green peaches, purple persimmons, blue acorns, and walnuts. Aside from purple persimmons, there was another fruit that was new to me: white pears. Now that, I *definitely* wanted.

“I’m counting on you guys for tomorrow’s tasks.”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

I decided my next step would be to walk around the village some more to fill in all the remaining gaps on my map. After all, exploring had led to the discovery of the door under the bridge in the Town of Beginnings. Even if my search didn’t turn up any notable results, though, my main purpose was to enjoy a leisurely stroll with my companions.

“Growl growl.”

“Chirp chirp.”

As Bear Bear skipped along the road, Rick, who was perched atop their head, bucked up and down like a cowboy in a rodeo show. He used his tail for balance as he clung on, seeming to find the whole thing delightful.

“Mmm.”

“...♪”

Meanwhile, Olto and Sakura walked hand in hand, looking very much like loving siblings. I was glad my monsters seemed to be enjoying themselves. By the time we were done filling in the northern half of the village map, the sun was already starting to set. The milky-white orb gradually took on a reddish hue as it sank below the horizon, bathing the entire village in orange. It was about time we headed back to Cayenne’s—the rest of the mapping could wait.

“Let’s go home, everyone.”

“Mm!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“...♪”

Olto and Bear Bear ran ahead of us, chasing each other, while Rick rode on my shoulder and Sakura held on to my left hand.

“Nice breeze tonight.” I sighed contentedly. It was getting a bit

windy now that it was evening. A slightly strong but nevertheless pleasant breeze blew our way, ruffling my hair. I spread my arms wide to embrace the feeling.

“Feels great.”

Rick and Sakura, who had been watching me closely, also spread their arms, mimicking my movements.

“Chirp chirp.”

“...♪”

Rick stood up on his hind legs on my shoulder, spreading his arms wide and feeling the wind on his soft white belly. His eyes were closed in contentment, whiskers quivering adorably in the breeze. Sakura copied me too, spreading her arms. Her hair whipped towards me, tickling me.

“Ha ha. That tickles.” I laughed, squirming and trying to get away.

“...♪”

Sakura seemed to enjoy my reaction, shaking her head to and fro and nuzzling it against my shoulder, which tickled even more.

“Aha ha ha! Stop it!”

“...♪”

“Chirp!”

Rick teamed up with her and began tickling my face with his bushy tail.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“Mmm!”

“Growl!”

Hearing my laughter, Olto and Bear Bear must have thought there was a game going on. They clung to my leg, determined not to be left out. *Careful you guys...!*

“Gah, I’m gonna fall...!”

“Chirp!”

“...!”

“Growl growl!”

“Mm-mm!”

Together, we fell as one in a tangled heap. Rick and Bear Bear’s fur was soft against my face, and my monsters were beaming. This was one of the only chances we’d gotten to play together like this, and it was nice to have physical contact once in a while. That being said, we should’ve picked a better place to have our playful brawl—both players and NPC residents were laughing at us by now. *Crap, talk about unwanted attention!*

“L-Let’s go!”

I quickly ushered everyone to their feet and bolted from the crowd, my companions grinning as they followed me. This probably just seemed like part of the game to them. By the time we arrived at

Cayenne's house, it was already dark.

"We're back," I greeted the old man.

"Welcome home. Dinner's ready," he replied.

"Thank you."

"No need to thank me. They're all simple dishes anyway."

Simple though they might have been, the food on the table looked incredibly appetizing. The old man had prepared rabbit soup, a delicious-looking salad with white tomatoes, and grilled eggplant. The only dish that was unfamiliar to me was a round flatbread that reminded me of naan.

"Looks delicious."

"Glad to hear that. Go on, take a seat."

"Thanks."

I sat down at the table, and Cayenne served me a glass filled with a purple liquid. At first, I thought it was wine, but it turned out to be purple persimmon juice. Seeing the drink reminded me that I needed to feed my monsters as well, so I gave some juice to Olto and Bear Bear, and some nut cookies to Rick. This was the last of the juice I had; I'd have to make some more tomorrow using the fruits I bought today. If all went according to plan, however, I'd be able to get fruits every day during the event, so it shouldn't be a problem.

"Mm-mm-mm!"

"Growl!"

"Chirp chirp!"

As Sakura didn't require any food, she simply smiled as she watched her siblings stuff themselves happily. *Time for me to dig in as well.*

"Thank you for the food."

"Bon appétit."

For starters, I reached for some flatbread. Although it looked like naan, it was softer and springier than I expected. I supposed the texture was closer to focaccia. I tore a piece off and tossed it into my mouth.

"That's tasty! The edges are nice and crispy, and the inside's chewy."

"That so? We eat this stuff every day, so I'm used to it. Glad to hear you like it, though."

"Really? I envy you."

How does he make this? I wondered. It would be great if I could keep eating it even after the event ended. Would he teach me the recipe if I asked him?

"Do you make this bread yourself, Cayenne?"

If it was store-bought, I'd ask him to tell me where the shop was.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I bake it in the oven right there."

All right! So he *did* make it himself.

“How do you make it?”

“What, do you cook?”

“A little.”

“Oho. I’ll teach you the recipe then. Why don’t you try making dinner? You can use whatever ingredients I have in the house.”

“Are you sure?”

Not only was he willing to teach me the recipe, but he was also willing to provide the ingredients? *And* I’d get to level up my Cooking skills? *What a dream come true!*

“Oh, yes. I’m not that good at cooking, so I’d appreciate it if you could handle it instead.”

“I’d love to! Thank you so much!”

After a delectable meal, I returned to our guest room along with my monsters.

“Right, time for bed. I’ll take this one here. Which bed do you guys want? Choose whichever one you like.”

Although monsters didn’t usually require sleep, they were required to get some rest whenever their master slept during the event. Since the announcement email had placed such a huge emphasis on sleep, it was probably better to let them rest in a bed. I had it all sorted out: Bear Bear, Sakura, and Olto could each have a bed to themselves, and Rick could sleep on a blanket in the basket in the corner. At least, that had been my plan.

“Mmm!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

To my surprise, Olto, Bear Bear, and Rick all dove straight onto my bed. Even Sakura had lain down beside me. Rick seemed fine since he was on my pillow, but what about the others? Weren’t they uncomfortable? I supposed it didn’t really matter since I’d be put to sleep automatically...

“Mmm.”

“...♪”

My companions seemed thrilled to share a bed with me. *Whatever, have it your way, guys.* In the end, Bear Bear took my right, while Sakura snuggled up to my left; Rick claimed the spot by my pillow, and Olto slept on my stomach. While it was certainly a tight squeeze, at least I didn’t have trouble breathing.

“I’m going to sleep now, okay? Good night.”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Growl.”

After patting everyone on the head, I lay down and entered six

hours in the sleep schedule pop-up window.



“Wow, I’m actually getting sleepy...”

I could feel my eyelids starting to droop. *Props to LJO for being so true to real life.*

“...Hm?” I yawned. Before I knew it, it was already morning, and I could hear birds chirping outside. I had to say, this was a super neat system. I felt extremely refreshed and well rested.

“Mm?”

“Growl?”

It seemed like my sudden movement had roused Olto and Bear Bear. Sakura and Rick were awake too.

“Chirp chirp?”

“...♪”

After a quick glance at Bear Bear and Olto, who were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes, Sakura stood up and went to the window, then flung open the curtains. She then spread her arms wide and began soaking up the sun. Now that I thought about it, she was a tree nymph, plus she had Photosynthesis skills. It would make sense that she enjoyed sunbathing. I left the room and headed downstairs, leaving my monsters to relax. My hunger meter appeared to have dropped while I was sleeping, and it was now down to twenty percent. I had forgotten to ask Cayenne whether he would be making breakfast as well. If breakfast wasn’t included, I would ask him if I could borrow his kitchen.

“Morning. Sleep well?” Cayenne greeted me.

“Like a baby. We all had a really good sleep,” I answered truthfully.

“Glad to hear that. Breakfast will be ready in a bit, so can you wait a while longer?”

How generous of him to prepare breakfast for me as well.

“It’s just leftovers from last night, though.”

“In that case, can I make breakfast?”

“Really? Very well then. For starters, I’ll teach you the recipe for the bread.”

The old man had agreed to teach me the recipe for last night’s flatbread. It was the type of dish you had to learn by doing, instead of just reading a recipe.

“First, you’ll need some of this.”

“Is that powdered edible grass?”

Name: Edible Grass (Powder Form)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Ingredient (Edible).

According to Cayenne, the powder was made by drying edible grass and grinding it with a millstone. It seemed like something I could make myself if I tried. The only caveat was that anything below a five-star quality would result in bitterness, so I had to be careful.

“Next, mix it with water and add some salt.”

“Gotcha.”

“Once the mixture has come together, you knead it like this...” Cayenne explained as he began kneading the dough. Other than the fact that it was slightly dark, it looked like regular bread dough.

“After kneading it, shape it into a ball and put it in a bowl to rest for thirty minutes.”

“You don’t need any yeast?”

“Yeast? What’s that?”

Apparently, the concept of yeast didn’t exist in this game. Perhaps it existed somewhere out there, though, just not in this village.

“The dough will start rising in about fifteen minutes. You just need to flatten it and bake it in the oven after that.”

“I see.”

Despite being a crucial component of bread making in real life, the lack of yeast didn’t stop dough from rising in LJO. That was game-world logic for you. While waiting for the dough to rise, we decided to prepare a salad. The ingredients were white tomatoes, spinach, and cabbage, a vegetable that looked exactly like cabbage. Although the only seasoning was salt and pepper, the vegetables looked tasty enough on their own. By the time the salad was done, the dough had miraculously doubled in size. Was it due to the edible grass, or was leavening simply not a relevant concept in this game? While I watched, the old man divided the dough into four pieces and flattened them out before placing them in the oven. The oven was operated by magic: all you needed to do was channel your magic to adjust the temperature, and that was it.

“We still have leftover soup from last night, but do you mind making one more dish?”

“Hmm... Sure, I’ll see what I can do.”

“No need to hesitate, we have plenty of ingredients. Why don’t you have fun experimenting? Doesn’t matter if you fail.”

“Are you sure?”

“More than sure. It’s not as if I can whip up anything impressive myself. Looking forward to your cooking, Yuto.”

I was delighted by his offer; encountering all these new ingredients had unlocked several recipes for me. I decided to try out a recipe that called for some meat and two types of vegetables, which I was pretty sure was a meat and vegetable stir-fry. Following the instructions, I cut up some rabbit meat into small pieces and cooked it

in a frying pan along with some chopped ultramarine eggplant and spinach. Lastly, I added a sprinkle of salt, and the dish was complete.

“So it *was* a meat and vegetable stir-fry.”

“Oho. Looks good, my boy.”

Although it was a bit heavy for breakfast, I didn’t feel guilty about overindulging in-game. The spread of flatbread, soup, salad, and stir-fry was certainly more extravagant than the previous night’s dinner.

“Mmm, that’s tasty.” Cayenne smacked his lips.

“It is,” I agreed. Thanks to the high-quality ingredients, the food tasted fantastic. We ate with relish, licking our plates clean. Well, *I* did most of the eating, anyway. Whilst we ate, Cayenne gave us a detailed overview of the village. Alf’s main industries were farming, forestry, and woodworking. Additionally, the monsters around the village were fairly strong and could prove to be difficult for players of my level. Rabbits were the weakest monsters, followed by Little Bears. At the very least, I could expect the monsters to be as tough as the ones I encountered in Zone Two. Cayenne also told me that he usually ate out for lunch, so our next meal together would be dinner.

“What’re your plans for today?” he asked.

“I’ll check out the Adventurers’ Guild after I’m done with the farmwork.”

“I see. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

After breakfast, it was time to take care of our daily chores. First stop, Cayenne’s farm.

“Get ready to work hard, everyone.”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

Olto, Sakura, and Bear Bear carried water from the pond while Rick and I took care of the weeds. I did most of the work, though, as the larger clumps of grass proved a bit much for Rick. Some of the weeds were about one meter tall, and though he tried his best to pull them out, they refused to budge, apparently deeply rooted in the ground. Seeing Rick’s efforts reminded me of the fable *The Enormous Turnip*. I could almost hear people heave-hoing in the background.

Attaboy, Rick! You’re almost there!

“Chirp chirp!”

Not that I intended to help him, however—he looked much cuter huffing and puffing.

“Guess the vegetables aren’t ready for harvest yet.”

I assessed the vegetables on the farm and found that there were white tomatoes, ultramarine eggplants, spinach, blue carrots, amber

pumpkins, and cabbaveges. All of them were currently marked as unavailable for harvest. That was weird. With Olto's abilities, they should've been ready for harvest by now... Did Olto's Forced Cultivation EX not work since Cayenne had already taken care of part of the farmwork yesterday? Either that or his skill hadn't activated on this farm since I wasn't the owner. Whatever the case, I would find out tomorrow. If I could harvest some crops tomorrow, that would mean Olto's skill worked on this farm too.

"All right, next stop is the orchard."

"Mm!"

When we arrived at the grocer's orchard, I spotted several fruits ready for harvest. Olto and Sakura's Arboriculture skills seemed to have worked just fine on the trees here. Seeing that made me more hopeful about Cayenne's farm as well. Together, we began plucking the fruits from the trees. At first, I was worried that Rick might eat the acorns, but I needn't have worried—he took his job very seriously. *Now, which four fruits should I choose as my reward...?* After some deliberation, I settled on one purple persimmon and one green peach, plus two white pears. When I asked Olto and Bear Bear which fruits they liked, Olto pointed at a white pear, while Bear Bear pointed at the green peach. We now had enough fruits to make juice. My next step was to find out whether they could be propagated.

"Olto, can you propagate these fruits?"

"Mmm..."

"That a no?"

"Mm!"

The answer was no. The sheer fact that it was a crop from an NPC's farm seemed to make it unpropagable. *What a shame. Maybe I ought to save as many white pears as I can while I'm in this village*, I thought. After all, they seemed to be Olto's favorite.

"Just gotta place these fruits in the item box now... And done. Mission accomplished."

After taking care of our chores on both farms, we set off for the Adventurers' Guild once again. I had yet to set foot inside the sole guild of the village, and I was keen to find out what types of quests were available and how many points they awarded. If the guild wasn't crowded, I might even consider accepting one or two.

"Good, it's not that busy today."

There was no queue outside the guild this morning, and a quick peek showed me that there were only about ten players inside at the moment.

"Wait here, everyone."

"Mm!"

"Growl!"

“...♪”

While the others complied and saluted in reply, Rick alone jumped nonchalantly onto my shoulder and assumed his position there.

“Oh well, I suppose you’re compact enough to come in with me.”

“Chirp!”

“Mind your manners, okay?” I reminded him, stepping inside the guild for the first time. The interior was a lot plainer than I had expected. There was a row of wooden counters, with a few symbols drawn on the floor to indicate where players were meant to wait in line. A generous comparison would be a fast-food diner in a rural American town. Bluntly speaking, however, it was rather dull inside. If it weren’t for the tiny quest notice board on the wall, you might forget that this was, in fact, an Adventurers’ Guild.

“Looks like your standard quests.”

Most of them were item delivery or monster-slaying quests, which weren’t exactly up my alley. Perhaps I could take on a rabbit-slaying quest? As for the persistent quest, it required players to slay Honey Bees.

“Haven’t fought one yet, though...”

That being said, since they were enemies that spawned in Zone Two’s Humming Forest, located at the end of the Eastern Plains, I felt like I could take them on, as long as there weren’t too many of them.

There were also several labor quests in the mix. Most of them were pretty boring, such as repairing roofs or making fishing rods. In terms of tasks that I could do, there were a few that involved taking care of farms. My job would be to water the seeds that had just been planted, among other odd jobs. I compared the quests, looking for the one that provided the most points.

“Depends on the location, though. It’d be nice if it were near Cayenne’s farm so I don’t have to go out of my way.”

Lo and behold, the farm turned out to be right next to old man Cayenne’s farm. It was also fairly large—about ten plots altogether. Hmm, a farm of that size would definitely take a while: I estimated at least two hours’ worth of work. Including Cayenne’s farm and the grocer’s orchard, that would amount to roughly four hours of farmwork a day...

Even though this was a special event, I was doing pretty much the same stuff each day. However, this was about the only way I could earn points, so it was probably for the best to accept the task. The quest required you to harvest crops, so I could most likely complete it faster than other people could, with Olto’s help. Besides, labor quests weren’t all that bad. Though they didn’t offer much in terms of monetary compensation, they did award you more event points. You

also received rewards and XP just like regular quests; the only difference was that instead of guild points, you received event points.

"I'd like to take on this quest, please," I told the receptionist.

"Very well. Let me mark the location for you."

I checked my map to see that the receptionist had marked not the farm itself, but a single house. It probably belonged to the person who'd put out the advert. Leaving the guild, we immediately set off in search of the house. While walking, I was overcome with a curious sense of déjà vu. Why was that? My question was answered once I arrived at the farm owner's house—we had already been here before.

"Hello again."

"Welcome."

The house belonged to none other than the surly old woman who owned the general store. I entered the shop, and sure enough, she greeted me, her expression sour as always.

"U-Um..." I faltered.

"What is it, boy? Speak up."

"I came here because I saw your quest at the Adventurers' Guild," I explained, struggling to maintain my composure in the face of such an intimidating woman.

"Is that so...?"

Ack, she's sizing me up! I stood my ground as the old woman looked me up and down, ignoring my discomfort. Though I tried cracking a smile at her, her face remained impassive as ever. Still, she seemed to have judged me fit for the task.

"Well, I don't mind as long as you do your job right. I'll show you where the farm is, so make sure you work hard."

"Absolutely. You can count on us."

"Mm!"

"..."

"Oho. Are those your monsters?"

Someone appeared to be a fan. The old lady's expression softened momentarily as she looked down at Olto and the others, who raised their hands at her in greeting. The way she was looking at them reminded me of an old woman watching over her grandchildren. Sensing my watchful gaze, the old lady glared at me, clearly affronted, all traces of warmth gone from her face.

"...Got a problem?" she harrumphed.

"N-No, not at all."

"Hmph. What are you standing here for then? Off you go."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Man, that was scary. I knew this was just a game, but my hands had gone clammy.

"Her farm's right next to the old man's, so let's hurry up and get

this over with.”

“Mm!”

We then headed to the old woman’s farm and spent the next couple of hours weeding and watering the crops. By the time we were done working, the sun was already high in the sky.

“That takes care of our chores for the day.”

It was only a few minutes past noon, leaving us with ample time until dinner. I mulled things over for a while, contemplating our next move.

“Should we venture outside the village for a bit...?”

“Mmm?”

While the thought made me slightly anxious, it wasn’t as if we had zero prospects of winning.

“Shouldn’t be that dangerous as long as we stay close to the outskirts.”

Surely, the difficulty level wouldn’t be so high as to keep us inside the village. Since the majority of battle-hardened players had chosen to participate in the Martial Arts Tournament instead, this event was, at least in my understanding, composed mostly of crafter types and players who wished to take things easy. The devs would have to be real douchebags to send you to your death simply for taking a leisurely stroll—or so I’d think anyway. Still, it didn’t hurt to take extra precautions, seeing as I was one of the weakest players of an already weak bunch.

“Let’s just get a taste of what it’s like. You’ll protect me, won’t you, Sakura and Bear Bear?”

“...!”

“Growl growl!”

We headed to the entrance, the sole gate embedded in the wooden enclosure surrounding the village. The gate didn’t have any lookouts or sentries, however, and people were free to come and go as they pleased. We were free to pass through the gate.

“Looks like the village is surrounded by a forest.”

Though I couldn’t see that far inside due to the trees blocking my view, the forest seemed pretty deep. Casting my glance upward, I noticed that we were surrounded by mountains on all sides. Apparently, this village was situated in a valley. I approached one of the trees to get a closer look.

“They look the same as the ones in Zone One.”

“Chirp!”

“All right, let’s look for some enemy monsters.”

Even after venturing inside the woods, I couldn’t really tell the difference between this one and the forests in Zone One. There did seem to be fewer gathering nodes, though, as even ten minutes of

walking turned up hardly any items. Although there were a few here and there, overall, the number was less than one-fifth of that in Zone One; Rick made far fewer foraging trips than usual.

“No signs of any monsters either.”

With enemy spawn rates being this low, I couldn’t hope for a whole lot of item drops. It looked like the number and types of items I could make during this event would be fairly limited. After another five minutes of walking, we finally encountered two rabbits. Although they twitched their noses adorably, I wasn’t about to let my guard down; I’d been bested by squirrels and rats far too many times for that.

“Get ready, guys!”

“Mm!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

“...!”

Awesome. That was the kind of enthusiasm I liked to hear.

“Whether we stay cooped up inside the village for the entirety of this event or not depends on the outcome of this fight. It’s an important one, got it?”

Despite steeling myself, I was completely taken aback by how weak the rabbits were. They turned out to be low-level opponents, instantly obliterated by my Aqua Ball and Bear Bear’s Claw Attack. Since we’d grown strong enough to defeat field bosses in Zone One, it seemed like enemies of this level no longer posed a threat to us. Regardless, I still struggled to rid myself of the wimp mentality I’d had since the beginning of the game.

“Let’s fight a few more times in this area.”

“Mm-mm!”

I walked around the playing field, being careful not to stray too far from the village. It looked like rabbits were the only enemies around here, and they never appeared in more than groups of three at a time. I was right; the difficulty level *had* been adjusted accordingly for crafter types.

“This is way too easy.”

“Growl.”

“Chirp.”

Rick and Bear Bear, who were more combative than the rest of us, looked somewhat disappointed. The pickings out here were slim; perhaps it was better to go deeper inside the forest and hunt for stronger opponents. What if they were *too* powerful, though...?

“Okay, time for a vote! Raise your hand if you prefer hunting rabbits near the village!”

“...♪”

Sakura was the only one who raised her hand.

“All right. Raise your hand if you’re in favor of going a bit further and finding stronger opponents!”

“Mm!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

The rest of the group seemed in favor of taking on stronger enemies. To be honest, I was kind of scared, but the people (or rather, monsters) had already cast their vote. I would only make them mad if I backed out now.

“Okay, let’s go a bit further inside then.”

If things headed south, we could always run. Having decided our next move, we moved deeper in, farther from the village. Although the trees closer to the village had been mostly cedar, there were fewer of them the farther we went, and the landscape was more diverse. Perhaps this area more closely resembled a virgin forest. Given the diverse vegetation, the monsters that lived here were bound to be different from the others we had encountered so far.

“Hey, a medicinal herb.”

“Chirp!”

Rick had also collected some blue acorns for me. This area seemed to have more gathering nodes than the previous, confirming my suspicion that the vicinity of the village was geared more towards beginners. We also encountered some more enemy monsters, finally.

“Two Rabbits, one Little Bear, and one Little Devil.”

The white-furred Rabbits and cub-like Little Bears were monsters I was already familiar with, but I had never seen a Little Devil before. It appeared to be a demon-type monster, though it hadn’t been on the list of Zone Two enemies I had researched. Was it a monster exclusive to this event or a monster from Zone Three? It had a large, black, basketball-sized sphere for a body with bat wings sprouting from it and a wide grin stretched across its face. Frankly speaking, it was creepy.

“You hold back the Little Bear, Olto. The rest of you focus your efforts on the Little Devil.”

In games of any type, it was practically a given for demon-type monsters to inflict you with status ailments and debuffs. Personally, I held more disdain for enemies like them that went for your blind spots than I did for monsters that simply had high stats—the former were a bigger pain to deal with. It was best to defeat them before they could pull any weird stunts on us.

“Aqua Ball!”

All right, I’d gotten a clean hit in! Sakura’s whip and Rick’s body slam further depleted the monster’s HP. As the Little Devil

whimpered, unable to move, Bear Bear delivered the final blow with their claws. While the sight of long claws sprouting from Bear Bear's teddy bear paws looked like something out of a horror movie, they were also incredibly reliable during battle. Once we had taken care of the Little Devil, we dealt with the two Rabbits one by one. We sustained a bit of damage, but the fight went by smoothly. It seemed like we wouldn't have any problems in this area either.

"Seems like Little Devils have less HP than Little Bears."

Although it had been our first time encountering them, they hadn't posed a significant threat. What did bother me, however, was the fact that my Aqua Ball hadn't dealt as much damage as I had hoped. It was glaringly obvious that my Aqua Ball was nowhere near as effective as Rick and Bear Bear's physical attacks. Evidently, Little Devils had high magic defense.

"Guess we should stick with physical attacks for Little Devils. I'm counting on you guys."

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...!"

Everyone but Olto gave me a simultaneous thumbs-up. Rick's tiny paw quivered, and Bear Bear's claw gleamed dangerously in lieu of a thumb. Sakura, who was usually rather meek and mild-mannered, looked surprisingly adorable as she mimicked the other pair's gestures.

"Let's try a few more battles before heading back. I wanna know what kind of items Little Devils drop."

While I managed to obtain a pelt from the Little Bear and meat from the two Rabbits, I failed to gain any drops from the Little Devil. As a general rule, enemy monsters in LJO dropped items once they were defeated, even if they were mobs. If you were lucky, you sometimes got multiple items or rare drops, especially if they were bosses. All things considered, it was extremely rare for monsters not to drop anything at all.

"Hmm, maybe Little Devils are exclusive to this event."

It would make sense if that were the case. Perhaps they gave you extra event points instead. In order to test my theory, I wanted to fight at least a few more Little Devils. We defeated four more of the demon-type monsters, but unfortunately, our battles yielded no drops whatsoever.

"So they *are* event monsters. Gotta say, though, they're a nasty piece of work."

Encountering two of them at the same time had resulted in us experiencing the full brunt of their attack. To my dismay, the Little Devils unleashed an AoE attack that diminished the effects of physical

damage against them. While the area of effect wasn't wide enough to extend to all party members, Rick and Bear Bear had been incapacitated, leading the rest of us to struggle immensely. Since the debuff effect persisted even after defeating our opponents, it ended up prolonging our next battle as well. The more drawn out the fight was, the higher the probability that we would sustain damage and run out of MP.

"Think we used up too much energy. Let's go back."

"Mmm..."

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 2

"Obviously, slaying quests are the way to go, dontcha think? They also earn you a bunch of points."

"True. Forget mobs like Rabbits, let's go orc hunting."

"Um, pardon me, but..."

"Huh? Receptionist NPCs like you don't usually talk to us. Whaddya want?"

"We'd appreciate it if you could take on these quests."

"Are you serious? *Weeding*? What are you, an idiot? As if we had time for such tedious quests."

"They're a pain in the ass, not to mention the payout's pretty low."

"I-In that case, how about this one?"

"Slaying *rabbits*? No effing way!"

"Give us something decent, you useless piece of shit!"

"B-But aren't you here to help our village? All of these quests are essential to the village's survival..."

"Idiot. We came here for the event, obviously. If we wanna aim for the top, we gotta rack up those event points. How do you expect us to do that with such menial tasks?!"

"Exactly. Can you shut up now? You're interfering with our plans."

"U-Understood..."

"All right, let's tackle this orc hunting quest!"

"I saw some others leaving the village just now. Better hurry up."

"Hell yeah!"

"...Forget it."

Chapter Two: The Villagers of Alf

“We’re back,” I called out upon returning to Cayenne’s house, but there was no reply—he didn’t seem to be home. I had assumed he was back since the light was on, but it seemed like the house lights in this village turned on automatically at a certain time regardless of whether you were there.

“Let’s make dinner before he comes back, then, shall we?”

He did mention that I could use whatever ingredients and seasonings he had around the house. There were several things I wanted to try, so I estimated it would take me a while to get everything done. Of all the dishes, soup seemed the most foolproof, so I decided to start with that.

“Hmm, where are the seasonings...? Ah, there they are. Looks like Cayenne’s got a pretty good selection.”

Any dish you cooked in LJO was automatically lightly salted, even without any seasonings—enough that it was just edible, anyway. Things were bound to taste better if you seasoned them properly, though. While I had only ever seen salt and pepper in the Town of Beginnings, Cayenne had several other condiments stocked in his kitchen. I assessed each item to see what they were, eager to experiment.

“Let’s see... There’s salt, pepper, soy sauce, miso, and olive oil.” I recited each item aloud before reaching for the soy sauce and miso. “These look pretty standard.”

I spooned some onto my fingers and discovered that they tasted just like the real thing. Actually, that was a bit of an overstatement; their taste and smell were markedly less pronounced than what I was used to in real life.

“Close enough, though. I can make soup with this.”

Not just any soup, but miso soup. Ideally, I wanted to make some dashi stock as well, but I didn’t see any ingredients that I could use for it, and my cooking skills weren’t good enough to make vegetable broth the way professional Japanese chefs did. If only there were some seafood lying around...

“I’ll look for some in the village tomorrow.”

For now, I would simply have to make do with regular miso soup.

“*Bread* and miso soup, though...?”

What I really wanted was some rice, but since I had yet to find

any, I had to make do. Although the bread wasn't strictly necessary, I did want to practice making it a few times to get the hang of it. The thought of which reminded me—I needed to get cracking on the dough first before preparing the soup.

“Mm?”

“...?”

“What's up? Curious?”

“Mm-mm!”

Whilst Rick and Bear Bear snoozed in the corner of the room, Sakura and Olto seemed intrigued by what I was up to. They peered into my bowl from either side of the table as I kneaded the dough with my hands.

“Mm-mm!” Olto snorted, sending the dried edible grass powder flying into Sakura's face.

“...!”

She rubbed her eyes furiously, groaning; the powder seemed to have stung her. Sakura shot Olto a glare. He hung his head, visibly embarrassed.

“...!”

“Mmm...”

“Pfft.”

“Mmm!”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Mm-mmm!”

As I chortled at their exchange, Olto pouted and slapped at my legs, fuming. However, that only made me laugh even harder. He looked so cute when he was angry.

“Ba ha ha ha.”

“Mmm!”

Time passed in a blur as Olto and I chased each other around the kitchen. If I didn't hurry up, Cayenne would be back soon. After instructing Olto and Sakura to give me some space, I returned to cooking. My next step was to prepare the soup while waiting for the dough to proof.

“I'll use rabbit meat and blue carrots. Hang on, should I add some ultramarine eggplants too?”

The recipe called for water and two types of ingredients; however, the soup Cayenne made yesterday had three. Perhaps I could add an extra ingredient too, if I wanted?

“You'll never know unless you try. Let's give it a shot.”

I brought some water to boil in a pot and added blue carrots, ultramarine eggplants, and Rabbit meat to it, along with some miso and a pinch of salt. After letting the soup simmer for a while, a fragrant aroma began wafting from the stove. Damn, that smelled

amazing.

“Looks terrible, though...”

Imagine a pot of brown soup with a sea of vibrant blue chunks floating in it. The sight was surreal and incredibly unappetizing, as though someone had chucked a bunch of toys into the pot. Regardless of how it looked, however, the recipe was a success, as my Appraisal skill told me that the soup before me was indeed miso soup. A single pot was enough for four people.

Name: Miso Soup

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 3★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 28% and HP by 4%.

While making the miso soup, the dough had finished proofing. I divided the dough, rolled out each piece, then placed the pieces into the oven. That was another dish done.

“I’d like at least a couple more. Maybe I’ll make a salad.”

By now, I was used to making salads, and the whole process took me a mere three minutes. The ingredients this time were white tomatoes, spinach, and cabbage, complete with an Italian-style dressing made with salt, pepper, and olive oil.

“That just leaves us with the main dish... I know, let’s make some barbecue!”

All I had to do was grill some meat, which was easy enough. However, that seemed boring, so I decided to jazz things up a bit.

“Dry!”

First, I dried some basil and sage and turned them into herbal tea leaves, to which I added some salt. My idea was to make some herb salt. I ground the dried herbs and salt using my mortar and pestle, and after a while, the herbs turned into fine dust and began dispersing among the salt. Flecks of green now dotted the white salt crystals, and I caught a whiff of a faint earthy scent. Once the concoction resembled what I was after, the process was complete.

“All done!”

I assessed what I had just made and found that my experiment had worked. It looked like there were probably better ways to make it, though, since mine was only a two-star quality, but still, a success was a success. All I had to do was sprinkle the herb salt on a hunk of grilled rabbit meat, and there you had it: *Lapin aux Sel de Provence*. Its actual displayed name was far less fancy, though—all it said was Grilled Rabbit Meat. Apparently, simply changing the seasoning wasn’t enough to affect the name of the dish. Now that I knew that, it struck me that the dishes sold at food stalls probably came in different flavors too. Grilled skewers were usually all called Grilled Rabbit

Skewers, but there was a possibility that they tasted different from shop to shop. I definitely had to test my theory sometime.

“Right, time for a taste test.”

It wouldn't be right to serve my host an unpalatable dish. After all, the herb salt was only two stars, so there was no guarantee that it would actually taste good.

“Here goes nothing.”

I gingerly took a bite of the meat, and my eyes instantly flew open in shock. I hadn't expected it to taste *this* good. Although the meat was slightly overcooked, the herb salt gave it a pleasant flavor. You could really smell the herbs too.

“Wait a second. Maybe it's just me?”

Now that I thought about it, the smell of herbs was pretty overpowering. That didn't bother me since I loved herbs, but people who weren't fond of them might find the taste somewhat bitter and unpleasant.

“...Maybe I'll just stick with soy sauce and miso for today.”

I decided I would formally serve Cayenne the herb-salted meat after he had had a proper taste of it. For now, I grilled some meat and seasoned it with soy sauce and miso. We now had four dishes, which ought to be more than enough for the night's meal.

Night had already fallen, and it was the perfect time to start having dinner. However, Cayenne still hadn't returned. Perhaps I would experiment a bit more while I waited. To tell the truth, there was a dish I had been dying to make ever since I first saw the flatbread, and finding some olive oil had only increased my yearning for it. Flatbread, white tomatoes, basilil, and olive oil. That's right: I wanted to make pizza. The idea of crispy, chewy flatbread smothered in olive oil and tomato sauce was enough to make my mouth water. It would have been perfect if I had cheese as well, but I had yet to find any in-game. *Bummer*. That wasn't the only problem, though. I had to find out whether it was possible to make tomato sauce; without it, there would be no pizza.

I chopped up some white tomatoes, threw them into a saucepan, and added some salt and pepper. After that, it was simply a matter of mixing and simmering. It was incredibly weird that the mixture gave off a tomatoey smell despite resembling béchamel sauce. However, after about fifteen minutes of stirring, the contents of the pot began to resemble tomato sauce. The tomatoes lost their shape and turned into mush, resulting in a thick, saucy substance.

“All right, time to add the finishing touches.”

Steeling myself, I channeled my magic into the saucepan.

“Let's see how that turned out...”

If all had gone according to plan, I would have made some sort of

dish. If not, it would turn into trash. There was a tiny *Poof!* and a small bottle of white sauce appeared before me. The item was named White Tomato Sauce. Although it had only three stars, I had undoubtedly succeeded in making tomato sauce.

“Heck yeah! I did it!”

I could make pizza now, not to mention I had increased my repertoire of dishes to boot!

“Mwa ha ha. Pizza’s definitely on the menu tomorrow!”

It was obvious what I had to do next: I had to get my hands on some cheese, no matter what. It didn’t have to be mozzarella—any kind of cheese would suffice. Once I had some cheese, I would have the ultimate pizza!

The following morning, I awoke to a jumbled mess of arms, legs, and paws once again.

“Do my monsters *have* to sleep in such weird positions? Is this supposed to make me happy...?” I grumbled, pushing Bear Bear’s foot out of my face as I sat up in bed.

“Wow, it’s already the third day of the event.”

As much as I was enjoying myself, I was slightly concerned that I hadn’t made much progress.

“Oh well, just gotta keep doing my own thing.”

First things first, I had to prepare breakfast. I headed to the kitchen, leaving the warm bed where my monsters still snoozed comfortably. I immediately got started on breakfast, which was a simple fare of flatbread, disgusting-looking miso soup, and vegetable stir-fry. Since I had already used up all the meat that Cayenne had, I used some rabbit meat that I had acquired the day before during my hunt. I got a little carried away and ended up making too much food, but I figured we could have the leftovers for dinner. If we needed something extra, I could always grill some meat as an additional side dish.

“What’s cooking?” asked Cayenne. “Smells good.”

“I made breakfast. Let’s eat.”

Over breakfast, I pressed Cayenne for more information about the village.

“What are your plans for today?” he asked me.

“Actually, there are several things I’m looking for. Know if I can get them here?”

“What do you want?”

“Fish or shellfish, for starters. Preferably something from the ocean. I’d also like some cheese.”

“Fool. You really think we’d get seafood in such a remote village?”

“Guess not.”

I should’ve known. Not that I had high expectations to begin with, seeing how far this place was from the shore.

“If you’re okay with freshwater fish, Roqué could probably help you out.”

“Who’s Roqué?”

“Roqué’s a river fisherman’s apprentice. Usually, his father’s in charge of the fishing, but unfortunately, he’s gone to the Martial Arts Tournament for the week. Roqué’s taken over the business for the time being.”

I might be able to get my hands on some fish if I met this Roqué guy. I’d tried ramen made from sweetfish broth before, so it was entirely possible to make dashi from freshwater trout. More than anything, I was craving some good old fish. I made up my mind to pay Roqué a visit.

“For cheese, I’m sure you could get some from Aval.”

“Is Aval a dairy farmer?”

“Yep. That’s right.”

Since this village was self-sufficient, farmers and merchants usually sold their products at their homes instead of selling them wholesale to a retailer. This was a valuable tip. I now knew that there were other ways of obtaining items besides buying them from a shop.

“Are there any others who sell their products from home?” I asked.

“Let me think... There’s Batz the mushroom gatherer, Cacal the hunter, and Knut the bean farmer. Those three sell stuff at their homes.”

They all sounded highly intriguing. I asked Cayenne for their addresses and made a mental note to pay them all a visit today. Before that, however, I had to take care of my daily chores. Upon arriving at Cayenne’s farm, I found a variety of vegetables ready for harvest. Olto’s Forced Cultivation EX and Sakura’s tree magic truly worked wonders.

“Awesome. Looks like we can harvest them today.”

“Mm!”

“...♪”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

I wasn’t quite sure how to proceed, though. Did I harvest all the vegetables and carry them to the house? What about sowing seeds afterwards? Leaving my monsters in charge of the farm, I returned to Cayenne’s house to ask him what steps I ought to take. According to him, I was to propagate half of the crops and plant them. He gladly let us do this task as well so that my companions could gain more XP. I

returned to the farm and was greeted by the sight of everyone working enthusiastically. Animals and fairies toiling away on a tranquil farm—no matter how many times I saw this scene, it never failed to look surreal.

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“...♪”

Olto and Sakura were harvesting the crops, albeit in different ways. While Olto simply yanked the vegetables from the ground, Sakura plucked them gently one by one. Although I didn’t think it would affect their quality, Olto’s method did make me raise my eyebrows.

Rick and Bear Bear were working together to pull out the weeds. They seemed to have a good division of labor, Bear Bear tackling the larger, deeply rooted weeds, while Rick focused on the smaller clumps of grass.

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl growl!”

Bear Bear, in particular, had an unexpected knack for weeding. Using their sharp claws usually reserved for slashing enemies, they plowed the soil like a tractor and got rid of the invasive plants in no time.

My monsters seemed to have gotten into a rhythm on the unfamiliar farm now, and we were done much earlier than the day before. At this rate, it was likely we could save some time on the other farms too. Once we were done with Cayenne’s farm, we headed to the old woman’s place. The vegetables on this farm were also ready for harvest. Since we didn’t have to do any watering there, our work was over before we knew it.

We completed our tasks on the farm and the grocer’s orchard one hour later. Having done our chores for the day, we were ready to head to our next destination. Before paying the other farmers a visit, we stopped by the old woman’s general store first. Once we delivered the vegetables we had harvested, we would be able to fulfill our quest.

“Good morning,” I greeted the old lady.

“You the traveler from yesterday? What do you want?”

“I’ve come to deliver your crops.”

“Well, well, that was quick. Thanks a lot. Let’s see what you’ve got then.”

“Um, here they are.”

What if she complained that their quality was too low? Nervously, I handed her the vegetables we had harvested. After staring at them intently for a few moments, the corners of her lips quirked up into a smile.

“Looks good to me. I have no issues with them,” she said with a smirk.

“Phew, glad to hear that.”

“You can receive your reward at the guild. Since you delivered these so early, I’ll throw in a little extra something.”

“Thank you very much.”

It looked like our harvest had stood up to the old woman’s standards. I was more relieved than happy that we hadn’t been yelled at. After bidding the woman farewell, we continued on our way to the Adventurers’ Guild. There weren’t that many people at the guild today. Upon reporting the quest as complete, I received extra points. The “extra something” that the old woman had mentioned apparently referred to event points. This was a much better bonus than a few measly coins. Once that was done, I checked the notice board to see if there were any other quests I could fulfill. One labor quest, in particular, caught my eye.

“It’s from the old lady again.”

“Chirp chirp?”

“This one right here. Look.”

The quest was the exact same one that we had just completed, both in terms of the client and its contents. It looked like this quest could be repeated as many times as you liked. I accepted the quest again without a moment’s hesitation; that the reward was pretty decent compared to the other quests I could take on. Under normal circumstances, you probably had to wait several days for the vegetables to grow before you could harvest and deliver them. In our case, though, we could repeat the process every day. *Talk about a sweet deal.* Once again, I returned to the old woman’s store for round two.

“Hm? Back so soon? Did you forget something?”

“I decided to accept your quest again.”

“Oh, that. Well, I appreciate your help. Since you’ve already done it once, you don’t need me to explain it again, do you?”

“Uh, I guess not.”

“Well then, good luck.”

Wow, impressive. So *this* was the power of a self-learning AI; she totally skimmed over the explanation for me. If this had been an older game, I probably would have had to endure the same explanation over and over again.

Two hours later, we set off to find the various workers Cayenne had told us about, having completed all our tasks on the old lady’s farm. Our first stop was the dairy farmer Aval’s house. The place was familiar to me, as I’d spotted the farm on the village’s edge the other

day on my walk, recalling seeing several cows there.

“Hello?” I called out, knocking on the door of the house that sat next to the farm. The knocker was shaped like a cow’s head, its nose ring being the part that struck the door. Clearly, the devs had put a lot of thought into the design.

“Coming.”

After a while, a portly old man answered the door. This had to be Aval.

“Why, hello there. Are you a traveler?” he asked.

“Hi. I am. Actually, I came here because I heard you sold cheese... Any chance I could buy some from you?”

“Ah, I see...”

Aval furrowed his brow and pondered for a while in silence. Wait, had I said something wrong? Was he not going to sell me any?

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t make a habit of selling my products to outsiders. I also make them in small batches, so I’m afraid that there won’t be enough for the villagers if I sell you some.”

So his stock was limited. That was a surprise. This game was pretty lax when it came to details like that; no matter how many players bought their items, NPC shops in town never seemed to run out of stock. However, events appeared to be an exception to this rule.

“That being said, I feel bad for turning you away after having come this far.”

“You mean...?”

“Mind doing me a favor? In return, I’ll give you the cheese that I was saving for myself. What do you say?”

Was this a spontaneous quest?! *Sign me up, old man!* Whether I’d be able to fulfill it or not was another story, though...

“I’d like you to procure some snacks for me.”

“Snacks?”

“Yes. I’ve been enjoying afternoon tea with my friends lately, and it’s my turn to prepare snacks for our upcoming party. I’m not sure what to get, though, and was thinking of buying some fruit instead. Could you find me enough sweet treats for five people?”

Snacks, eh? The question was, how good did they have to be to count as one? Although I had some honey nut cookies, they were listed on the same page as food rations in my encyclopedia. Things would be significantly more challenging if they had to be in their own separate category. If I could make bread with powdered edible grass, perhaps I could make cakes as well? Pancakes were also a nice and easy option. Or was there something else I could make instead? Before I started experimenting, it was probably a good idea to find out whether my honey nut cookies counted as snacks. I decided to show them to Aval.

“Do sweet food rations count?”

“What are they like?”

“Like these. What do you think?” I asked, handing him the honey nut cookies I had stored in my inventory.

“Why, how splendid!” Aval exclaimed, beaming all over. So they *did* count as snacks. I had evidently accomplished my mission already.

“You just need five of them, right?”

“Thank you! I’m sure my friends will love these!”

With the transaction complete, I finally had the cheese I had sought so eagerly. On top of that, Aval had given me a whole round of cheese, which was much more than I had expected. According to him, it was enough for thirty servings. I felt like the person who had traded his way from a single red paperclip to a house, given how small an investment it cost me to make those cookies. Initially, I was concerned that I was benefiting too much from this exchange, but ultimately, it was an event quest. If I hadn’t had those cookies from the beginning, it would’ve been extremely difficult to obtain snacks in the village.

“We’ve got tomato sauce, cheese, olive oil, and basilil. Think of all the Italian dishes we can make!”

Man, this was exciting as hell! I was *definitely* going to make pizza tonight.

“All right, guys! Let’s move on to our next destination!”

“Mm!”

“...♪”

My smile appeared to be contagious, as my monsters beamed back—not that that was any different from their usual happy-go-lucky demeanor. Our next stop was Knut’s house, which was the closest to Aval’s farm. Judging from the title “bean farmer,” they probably only grew beans. While other players would most likely walk past their farm without a second glance, I had high hopes. Beans reminded me of the roasted beans I’d seen in the Town of Beginnings, which appeared to be Rick’s favorite food. Rick would surely be overjoyed if I could learn to make them myself. If I couldn’t buy any seeds, my next best option was to buy as many beans as possible. Wait a minute, though—weren’t beans considered seeds? How did that work then? Did they double as both? I guessed I would find out once I got there.

After about ten minutes of walking, a single farmhouse loomed ahead of me. According to the map, that was where Knut’s farm was located.

“And we’re here... This is the place, right?”

From the roadside, I could see a farm behind their house where several vines grew. *Those must be the beans*, I thought. Appearance-wise, there was nothing unusual about the house. I doubted anyone passing by would think of buying beans here. I would never have been

able to find this place myself if Cayenne hadn't told me about it.

"Hello? Is anyone home?" I called out.

"Just a minute."

I got a response as soon as I knocked on the door. Presently, a petite woman of around twenty greeted me, eyeing me up and down suspiciously. I presumed this young woman was Knut.

"Well, well. Are you a traveler? What brings you here?"

"I was told that you grow beans on your farm, and I was hoping you could spare me a few."

"Is that so? Who told you that?" Knut asked, looking visibly troubled. I didn't seem to be very welcome around these parts. Like Aval mentioned earlier, most producers only seemed to make enough items for the villagers' consumption, so it was understandable that they weren't used to outsiders asking them to sell their products.

"I heard about you from Cayenne. I'm staying at his house for the time being."

"Hmm, if Cayenne sent you here, I can't just turn you away, can I?"

Would I have been sent away if I had simply called on her without a letter of recommendation? *Thanks, old man. I owe you one.*

Unfortunately, Knut still looked unsure.

"Come on, guys. Show some manners."

Some might argue that I was playing dirty, but I decided to make full use of my tamed monsters' powers: namely, their irresistible cuteness. *Mwa ha ha. Let's see how you fare against these killer puppy eyes—capable of melting even the coldest of hearts!*

"Mm?"

"...?"

"Chirp?"

"Growl?"

My tamed monsters gave Knut a pleading look whilst gently placing their hands on her legs. That seemed to have done the trick.

"O-Omigosh...! How cute can you be?!" she squealed, patting each of them on the head in turn with a blissful look on her face. She looked like she was on the verge of glomping them.

"...! Ahem."

Noticing my gaze, she gave an embarrassed little cough and cleared her throat before composing herself.

"S-So, what is it that you want?" she asked. All right, it looked like she was willing to sell me some beans now. "Soybeans? Or are you looking for some miso or soy sauce?"

Say *what*? Did she just say what I think she said?

"You sell miso and soy sauce?"

"Of course. I *am* a bean farmer, you know."

So this was where Cayenne bought his miso and soy sauce from. It was pretty impressive that she not only grew her own beans, but turned them into condiments as well. Although I hadn't expected to find staple Japanese condiments here, I certainly wasn't complaining.

"I'd like some beans, miso, soy sauce, and a few seeds too, if possible. Can you grow soybeans by planting their seeds?"

"Of course. They *are* vegetables, after all."

According to Knut, you could grow soybeans just like any other vegetable by planting their seeds on your farm. Propagating the harvested plants would give you soybean seeds. In LJO, beans and seeds apparently belonged to separate categories.

"Sorry, I don't have any seeds to spare. I can share the other items with you, though."

I supposed it had been too much to ask for some seeds. Still, I was genuinely glad that she was willing to give me some miso and soy sauce. I figured I might as well ask her how to make them while we were at it.

"How do you make miso and soy sauce from beans?"

"It's pretty easy. All you have to do is boil the beans, smash them up with some salt, then ferment them in a magical tool called a fermenting barrel. Using plain salt will give you miso, while salt water will give you soy sauce."

"Can you get fermenting barrels in Alf?"

"I'm afraid not. I bought mine in the Town of Beginnings."

That was news to me. I guessed I had simply failed to find the store that sold them during my excursions. Moreover, if I could buy roasted beans, I would most likely be able to get my hands on some raw beans as well. Making my own condiments didn't seem like such a far-fetched goal. However, things turned out to be slightly more complicated than that.

"As the name suggests, you can't use fermenting barrels unless you possess Fermentation skills."

"Fermentation skills? Didn't know that was a thing..."

Now that I recalled, there was a job class entitled Brewer. That being said, I wasn't sure if I wanted to learn Fermentation purely for the sake of making soy sauce... *Hang on, though*. Didn't that mean I could make alcohol if I wanted to? I asked Knut about it, and she told me that Fermentation enabled you to make all sorts of things, including alcoholic beverages and yogurt. Winding down at the end of the day with a glass of home-brewed wine or beer definitely sounded enticing. Pair it with some homemade cheese or cucumber dipped in miso, and there you had it: sheer perfection! I was also curious to see how my companions would react to drinking alcohol. Learning this skill could wait until after the event, though. I made a mental note to

look it up once I'd returned to town.

For now, I purchased ten servings of beans and one crock each of miso and soy sauce. The crocks were relatively small—only about three liters big—so it wasn't a whole lot, although there wasn't much I could do about it. Regardless, I felt fortunate that I was able to buy some at all.

"Let's see, the next closest house is..."

According to the map, Batz's house was closest to the bean farm. We horsed around along the way, but it still took us less than five minutes to get there.

"Hello?"

"Mm-mm!"

Olto and I both knocked on the door, but no one answered. The mushroom gatherer appeared to be out.

"Let's try again in the evening."

"Mm."

"Guess Cacal's house is next."

Although the fisherman's house was just as close, I decided to visit the hunter first. Both of their houses were located near the village entrance, which meant I had to pass through the central square on the way. Immediately, I could tell that we were attracting a lot of attention. *Not me, but my monsters, that is.* Hordes of women squealed as we passed by, and their gazes were clearly concentrated at my feet. Even though I had experienced this countless times already, I still wasn't used to all the attention. Ignoring my discomfort, I hurried across the square, when someone called out to me from behind.

"Um, excuse me."

"Yes?"

I turned around and found myself face-to-face with a man who was half-human, half-beast.

"You're Silver-Haired, aren't you?" he asked hesitantly.

As much as I didn't want to answer that question, there was no point denying it.

"Yeah, some people call me by that name." I nodded reluctantly.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to ask you something. Mind sparing me a few minutes of your time?"

Contrary to his wild beast-like appearance, the man was unbelievably humble. It was hard to refuse such a polite request. It reminded me of business deals I often did at work.

"Uh, sure, as long as you keep it short," I caved.

"Thank you. The thing is, I wanted to ask you where you're staying."

"What do you mean?"

According to the guy, there weren't enough places to stay in the

village, leaving many players stranded and without lodgings. The inn could only accommodate a few people at a time, not to mention tents could only be used in the square. While it was possible to set up camp outside the village, tents weren't considered safety zones, which meant you were vulnerable to monsters' attacks. Simply sleeping outdoors didn't recover your HP either. The solution they had come up with for now was to share the limited space in the square and take turns setting up tents for sleeping. Apparently, they had noticed my absence while drafting up a list to create a timetable for people camping in the square. We did stand out, so I supposed it was only a matter of time before people noticed we were missing.

"Basically, you wanna know where we're staying, is that it?"

"Yes. Or rather, we'd like to know if it's possible to stay somewhere other than the square and inn. Is that too much to ask for...?"

Hmm. I didn't see the harm in telling him. Although I couldn't very well invite others to Cayenne's place, it wasn't as if it would do me any harm to share where I was staying. The man seemed shocked upon hearing that I was staying at an NPC's house. Apparently, several players had attempted asking NPCs if they were willing to put them up, only to be refused flat out. Based on their experience, people had assumed that staying at an NPC's house wasn't a possibility.

Upon further questioning, however, I was able to suss out why they had been turned away. It seemed like they had simply depended on the villagers to take them in out of the goodness of their hearts without offering anything in return. While purely coincidental, I had offered to help Cayenne with the farmwork in exchange for my lodgings. That probably accounted for the difference in treatment, I informed the man.

"I see. So we have to help the villagers and win them over somehow."

"That's just my guess, though. There are labor quests you can do to help them, so why don't you give it a shot?"

"Good point. I'll give it a go. Is it all right if I share this information with the others?"

"Go ahead."

Since it was unlikely that I'd earn a whole lot of server points, this was one of the few ways I could contribute to the team, however slight.

"Thank you so much! I appreciate the help!" The man bowed profusely before departing, polite until the very end.

Despite getting slightly sidetracked in the square, we were able to find Cacal's house eventually. It was a log cabin, tucked away out of sight in a particularly densely forested area of the village near the

entrance. The house was dead silent. Were they not at home?

"Hello?" I called out, knocking on the door. To my surprise, the door immediately opened a crack, as though the person inside had been anticipating us. It didn't open any further than that, though, leaving only a ten-centimeter gap. They seemed to be on their guard. After waiting a while longer, I caught a flash of movement. An old man with a towering gaze looked down at us from the gap in the door, his wide-eyed stare eerie. The scene reminded me of a certain old survival horror game set in a cold, insular village that was popular a while back. In the game, an old man would scream, *Outsiders, begone!* and if you continued to talk to him, he'd pick up a machete and start chasing you.

"An outsider, eh...?" the old man muttered in a low, intimidating voice. *Huh? No way.* Was I *actually* trapped in a survival horror game scenario? Was this peaceful and beautiful village secretly plagued by dark and unimaginable horrors? Could my kind and hospitable host, Cayenne, actually be a crazed old man who took part in sinister rituals every night?

As my imagination ran wild, the door opened slowly and noiselessly, and a burly, white-bearded old man emerged from within. *D-Damn*, he sure was intimidating. He was much taller than me, and his gaze hidden behind the curtain of long white hair was frightfully piercing. A long gash ran from between his brows to his cheek. He was clearly an ex-bandit chief or a veteran who had been through many wars. I wouldn't be surprised if he was formerly known as the most powerful adventurer of all time. What was the deal with this super buff old man, though?! He was scary as hell! The enormous machete in his right hand only served to augment his threatening aura. *Wait, a machete...? Holy crap. You've got to be kidding me!*

"H-Hi," I stammered, hoping to strike up a conversation. After all, all friendships started with a greeting! *Have you ever seen such a perfectly harmless and amicable chap?! I'm not a weirdo at all, I promise! So please, don't start attacking me out of the blue!*

"Yeah?"

"U-Um, would you happen to be Cacal?"

"Uh-huh."

While he did nod in reply, his expression remained impassive. It was impossible to tell what went on in his head.

"I heard that I could buy some stuff from you that you got while hunting. W-Would you be willing to sell me your products?" I asked, being extra careful not to anger the beefy old man. *T-Talk about nerve-racking!* I hadn't been this nervous since that time I was forced to have dinner with my boss when I was still a newbie at the company! My boss had suddenly been overcome with a need to show how generous

he was, and we young employees who had been working overtime had been selected as his unwilling victims. Although we'd dined at an expensive fancy restaurant, I barely remembered what we ate that night. All I remembered was my boss's poor sense of humor and dad jokes.

"Who told you that?" Cacal glared at me, evidently on his guard. It was the same thing as Knut all over again. Fear not, though—I had a strong ally on my side!

"I-I heard it from Cayenne."

As soon as I uttered Cayenne's name, Cacal's expression softened ever so slightly. He now reminded me less of a demon and more of the forboding Nio statues you might see outside Buddhist temples.

"I see. Cayenne sent you, eh?"

"Th-That's right."

As much as I longed to pull another cute monster stunt like I did with Knut, I didn't have the heart to sic my monsters on him. I wasn't sure if that tactic would work on a menacing, brawny old man like Cacal, and it was hard to imagine him cooing over cute things. Besides, Olto and the others were cowering behind me, Olto clinging to my leg while Bear Bear squeezed Olto from behind, Rick hiding behind them. Those sneaky munchkins were using me as a shield. Only Sakura looked exasperatedly at her siblings, albeit from a distance.

"What do you want then, boy?"

"Does that mean you're willing to sell?"

"Yeah."

A window popped up in front of me. It looked like I'd be able to buy a few products from him, much to my relief. The products listed were Rabbit pelts, Rabbit meat, Little Bear pelts, Little Bear claws, Attack Boar meat, Olive Treant fruits, and Olive Treant branches.

Attack Boars were wild boar monsters that appeared in Zone Two and were roughly the same difficulty as Little Bears. The name Olive Treant was unfamiliar to me, but it wasn't hard to guess that they were the main ingredient for olive oil. I hadn't known that olive oil came from a monster instead of a plant. I could obtain the materials from Rabbits and Little Bears myself, though. I hadn't fought any Attack Boars yet, but they could wait until after the event now that I knew where to find them. That left me with Olive Treants. While I didn't think the branches were necessary, I was keen to acquire some fruit. I figured I could squeeze some oil out of them or use them in cooking. Since they only cost 200 G each, I decided to buy five pieces, the maximum amount I could purchase. I also bought a hunk of Attack Boar meat for tonight's dinner.

"I'd like to buy the following items. Is that okay?"

“Sure.”

“Th-Thanks!”

“No problem.”

Cacal neither yelled at us nor attacked us with his machete; he simply waved us off in a brusque manner as we left his house. Contrary to his terrifying appearance, perhaps he was just a shy and slightly reserved upstanding citizen? *Nah, as if. Not with that face.* Anyway, I had managed to get my hands on some boar meat. Although it wasn't exactly the same as pork, I figured I could make some pork miso soup with this. For that, I needed some good dashi.

“Let's get some fish, baby!”

We headed to Roqué's house next, our spirits high. The fisherman's abode was right outside of the forest that Cacal's house was situated in.

“All right, time to get some—”

“Are you looking for fish, mister?”

“Huh?”

Just as I was about to knock on the fisherman's door, I heard someone address me from behind. I turned around and saw a young boy with tanned skin wearing an obviously handmade straw hat on his head. The way he was dressed reminded me of a typical country kid. The boy trotted towards me, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hiya! I'm Roqué! What's your name, mister?” he greeted me cheerfully.

“I'm Yuto, a traveler. Are you Roqué, the fisherman's apprentice?”

“You bet I am!”

Being an apprentice, I had imagined him to be fairly young, but certainly not *this* young. He couldn't be more than twelve years old. Judging from the creel tied to his waist and the long fishing pole slung over his shoulder, however, he didn't seem to be lying.

“I came to pay you a visit since I heard that I might be able to get some fish from you.”

“Ah, of course...”

As soon as I mentioned that I wanted some fish, Roqué's expression turned glum. I should've known it wouldn't be that easy.

“You know I'm just an apprentice, right? I'm not as talented a fisherman as my pops, so it's all I can do to fulfill the villagers' orders. Sorry.”

“You can't spare me anything, not even a single fish?”

“Nope. As it stands, I barely have enough for the villagers.”

“I see...”

Too bad. If he didn't have enough to go around to begin with, then I couldn't hope to take on a quest in exchange for some fish either.

“Hmm. How badly do you want some fish?” he asked.

“Very,” I replied.

“In that case, I’ll show you to a fishing spot, so why don’t you try catching some yourself? I was planning on going fishing again anyway.”

That was an unexpected suggestion. Was that possible, though? If it were, I’d definitely be up for it.

“I don’t have Fishing skills, though.”

“Aw, too bad. Guess you’re out of luck.”

Talk about being shot down!

“Sorry, but I don’t make the rules around here.”

“Hang on, though. As long as I possess Fishing skills I *can* catch fish, right?”

“Mhm. I’ll even lend you a fishing pole.”

That settled things. I still had some bonus points, after all! Although I’d been saving them for more practical options like combat skills, I hadn’t come this far just to give up. Besides, fishing in-game sounded kind of fun. Having made up my mind, I used two bonus points to acquire the skill Fishing.

“Should be able to use a fishing rod now.”

“Cool. Here, try holding this,” Roqué said, handing me a fishing pole. Without the appropriate skills, I’d be able to hold it, but not use it. To be more specific, I would neither have any markers appear to assist me in casting nor any sort of calibration. I wouldn’t be able to catch any fish by dangling the line either. Apparently, quite a few players had failed to realize this and wasted their time at the beginning of the game. *Tough luck, guys.*

“Good, it seems to be working just fine.”

“Looks like you’ll be able to fish, Yuto!”

“Awesome, I’m excited! What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“All right, leave it to me! I’ll take you to one of my best fishing spots!”

The six of us hit the road, the enthusiastic Roqué at the lead. As I suspected, given that there weren’t any rivers running through the village, the fishing spot was somewhere on the outskirts. For a moment, the pond near Cayenne’s farm crossed my mind, but I doubted you’d be able to catch enough fish for all the villagers there. Curious about this newcomer, Rick, Olto, and Bear Bear clung to Roqué, making it difficult for him to walk.

“Hey, quit climbing on top of my head! Gah, leave my hat alone! What if it comes undone?!”

“Chirp.”

“Back up a bit, will ya? I can’t walk properly! Eek, I’m gonna fall!”

“Mmm.”

“Hey, get your nose out of my basket! There’s nothing to see!”

“Growl.”

Roqué wasn't so much playing with my monsters as being used as their plaything. I didn't blame them; since they spent pretty much all of their time with me, they were probably thrilled to have a playmate closer to their age. Being slightly older, Sakura kept her distance and watched over her siblings, smiling beatifically.

Ding-dong.

Just then, a familiar announcement tone rang out.

“It is now noon on Day Three of the event. Here are the results so far.”

“Huh, wasn't expecting to get a progress report.”

Having received no word on the first and second day, I had assumed there wouldn't be any announcements this time either. Starting today, however, it looked like they would be sending us daily updates for the remainder of our time here. A second in-game message contained all sorts of information and stats related to the event.

I decided to check the individual rankings first. At the moment, I possessed 149 event points. I had earned one hundred points from helping the old lady at the general store, while the remaining points had come from slaying monsters such as Little Devils and Rabbits and completing other odd delivery quests. Out of the 298 players in Server No. 29, I currently ranked in 274th place. That was higher than I expected; I wouldn't have been surprised to come in last. That being said, even the bottom-most player had earned 120 points, so it was only a matter of time before the tables turned if I wasn't careful. The top player currently had a whopping 411 points and probably had an optimal strategy for tackling each quest. Perhaps they were also hunting event monsters like Little Devils, though they'd have to defeat quite a few of them to grind up points that way, seeing as they only gave you one point each.

Another section had piqued my curiosity, namely the server contribution rankings. Players were listed only by name and rank, and the number of event points you possessed seemed irrelevant—I was currently in fourth place. *What on earth?* I was utterly mystified. While the players in first and second place were the same people who had earned the most points, Siegfried claimed third place, followed by me in fourth. Incidentally, Siegfried possessed 231 points, earning him only 139th place in the event rankings. The player in fifth place was also twelfth place in the event point rankings, so apparently there was no real correlation between the two.

“Hmm. While I'm definitely not complaining, I can't for the life of me think what I've done to rank so high...”

I couldn't think of anything I'd done that would boost my contribution to our server like that—nothing that would make sense,

anyway. Perhaps it would become apparent to me as the days went on.

Finally, I checked the server rankings. I was surprised to discover that there were thirty-three servers altogether. Our server, Server No. 29, was currently in third place, while the number one spot was claimed by Server No. 7.

“Wow, we’re doing better than I thought.”

It looked like the other players were really racking up those event points. As I scrutinized the progress report from the devs, Roqué looked at me questioningly, head cocked to the side.

“Whatcha doing, mister?”

I supposed it was only fair that he was curious. Anyone would be puzzled if their companion suddenly came to a halt and started muttering at their status window.

“Sorry. Just got an important message.”

“Gotcha. I’ll leave you to it then.”

I was thankful that the NPCs in this game understood gaming lingo. While they never brought up the subject of gaming themselves, they didn’t question any terminology you mentioned either. They seemed to have an inherent understanding of what you were referring to and casually sidestepped the topic. Once I finished checking the report, I returned to my conversation with Roqué, not wanting him to feel slighted by my ignoring him for too long.

“Chirp chirp!”

As we walked to the fishing point, Roqué telling me about his father, Rick scampered up my shoulder, hackles raised and alert. He began pulling at my hair and pointing at a corner of the forest repeatedly.

“Chirp chirp!”

“What? Is it a monster?”

“Chirp!”

Seeing Rick on his guard, Olto and the others immediately shifted into a fighting stance. Thank goodness they were so reliable. That being said, there was something odd about Rick’s behavior. The only monsters that spawned in this area were Rabbits, so I didn’t see any reason for him to panic to this extent. Usually, the most he would do was give a slight warning. After about ten seconds, several monsters emerged from the forest.

“I was right, they’re just Rabbits... Hm?”

Wait a minute. There was something strange about them. Two of the three Rabbits that had appeared before us resembled ordinary, white-furred Rabbits. However, the one in the middle was slightly different from the rest. Although my Appraisal skill told me that it was indeed a Rabbit, its body was engulfed in a black mist.

“You ever seen that black Rabbit, Roqué?”

“Nuh-uh. Never seen anything like it.”

Since neither of us had encountered it before, it wasn't possible to gauge how strong it was. Still, it *was* just a Rabbit. How powerful could it be?

“Grrrr,” the black Rabbit snarled in a voice unbecoming for such a creature, not bothering to conceal its hostility in the slightest.

“Looks like it means business!”

It seemed like we had no choice but to fight. We could always make a run for it if things got really bad.

“Stay back, Roqué.”

“Don't worry! I can fight too!”

“Huh? You sure?”

“You betcha!”

Despite my concern, Roqué beamed with confidence. I wasn't thoroughly convinced, though. What happened to NPCs when they died? I hoped he wouldn't get defeated in one blow. Regardless of how well he could fight, however, I was glad to have some extra help.

“Okay. You take the normal Rabbit on the right, though. Sakura and I will handle the Rabbit in the middle. Olto and Rick, you two protect Roqué. Bear Bear, you tackle the Rabbit on the left!”

“Gotcha!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

“...!”

At my signal, everyone began moving. Sakura took aim and unleashed her whip on the black Rabbit. Usually, the whip would coil around her opponent and restrain their movements. However...

“Grarr!”

“Damn, that was quick!”

The black Rabbit jumped to the side and dodged Sakura's attack, charging straight at us instead.

“...!”

“Thanks, Sakura!”

Thankfully, Sakura was also a skilled tank. She faced the black Rabbit head-on and blocked its blow, sending it staggering backwards. Of course, I wasn't one to pass up an opportunity like that, although truthfully, I would've been a fool not to take advantage of the situation, given that the monster had lost its balance and was completely vulnerable.

“Aqua Ball!”

“Grrr!”

“Phew. Glad it didn't have an HP buff.”

The black Rabbit squealed as my attack struck, before slumping to the ground. Judging from the amount of damage it inflicted on Sakura, its blows weren't that powerful either. The only aspect that had been above average was its Agility.

"Growl!"

Bear Bear's sharp claws sent one of the cute little white Rabbits flying, transforming it into polygons. I tried my best to ignore the fact that it looked like they were bullying a poor, innocent animal. This game was full of cute monsters, after all. Now then, how was Roqué's group doing?

"Mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Take that!"

Once Olto had blocked the Rabbit's attack, Rick pounced on the creature, knocking it off-balance. After that, it was up to Roqué to deal the final blow. To my amazement, he attacked the Rabbit by casting his fishing rod, taking it from half HP down to zero. His blows must have been pretty powerful, not to mention how large his attack range was. Perhaps I had underestimated just how strong fishers were.

"Glad you're all right."

"Heh heh. I'm stronger than I look, dontcha think?"

"Yeah. I'm impressed."

With his skills, he was more than capable of handling Rabbits or monsters of similar difficulty. If anything, he was probably more reliable than me.

"...Now that that's over, I might as well check my item drops."

Since it was an unusual opponent, I figured it might have dropped a few special items. Unfortunately, my expectations were dashed—the creature had failed to drop anything at all. There wasn't even a single hunk of meat or pelt. Instead, I had obtained four event points. Bonus points in lieu of drops—that meant this black Rabbit was another event monster, just like the Little Devil we had defeated the other day.

"Guess there are all kinds of monsters out there."

"If we run into any more of those, you can count on me!" Roqué thumped his chest reassuringly. Battling that mysterious black Rabbit hadn't increased our encounter rate or anything, though, and the remainder of our journey was uneventful. Before long, we had arrived at our destination.

"That's the spot!" Roqué said, pointing at a river. The river was approximately a fifteen-minute walk from the village, surrounded on both sides by grayish-brown ledges. Perhaps "mountain stream" was a more accurate way to describe it than "river." The running water was crystal clear, so inviting I had to suppress the urge to scoop it up into my hands and drink it.

"It's pretty close to the village," I commented.

"Duh, obviously! The farther you go, the less safe it is. As long as you stay close to the village, you won't run into any dangerous monsters."

Considering we'd only encountered Rabbits so far, this was probably a safer area, like he said.

"You can find some pretty rare fish if you go further upstream, but unless you're as strong as my pops, you'll just end up getting your butt kicked," Roqué continued. I wondered how strong his father was.

Seeing as Roqué was already a pretty capable fighter himself, his father had to belong to one of the higher-level job classes. I wouldn't be surprised if he could ward off dragons with his fishing pole.

"Do the fish upstream taste better then?" I asked.

"They sure do. It's my dream to fish upstream one day!"

As much as I longed for tasty fish, I wasn't confident about my fighting abilities. I could barely protect myself, let alone Roqué. For the time being, I was more than content to stay here where I could fish at a leisurely pace.

"All right, let's get started," Roqué piped. "You can catch a lot of fish if you climb up that rock."

"Looking forward to it."

"This is the bait we're using," Roqué added, handing me a bag filled with lots of brown mud ball-like objects that emitted a faint fishy smell.

"Paste bait, eh?"

"Yep. Courtesy of my pops."

Name: Raqué's Paste Bait

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 7★

Effect: Attracts more freshwater fish.

Roqué immediately baited his fishing hook and dangled the line in the stream. With his tanned skin, straw hat, creel, and fishing pole, he looked like the spitting image of Fisherman Sanpei. I could imagine him catching a massive fish and eventually battling the king of the river.

"All right, let's see how this goes," I enthused, gripping my fishing rod. "Looks like you get a marker if you have Fishing skills."

A marker had appeared on the surface of the water to indicate where I should cast my line. I focused my attention on it and cast my rod. Despite my less-than-stellar form, I was able to direct my line where I wanted it to go. The whole setup was incredibly beginner-friendly.

"You won't catch anything without bait, mister."

"I know. I was just testing the waters."

This time, I made sure to bait the hook properly.

"There, all done."

"Great! It's just a waiting game now."

Mimicking Roqué, I sat on a rock and dangled my line in the water.

"Wonder what kind of fish I'll catch?"

"Mm-mm?"

"...?"

Olto and Sakura stared at me curiously. Apparently, the concept of fishing was foreign to them.

"This is called fishing. See this line?" I explained.

"Mm."

"The line's connected to a hook with some bait on it. You lure the fish in with bait and catch them by impaling them on the hook."

"...♪"

My explanation seemed to have given them a vague idea of how fishing worked. After plonking down beside me, my two companions began staring intently at the end of the line. Rick and Bear Bear chased each other in the meanwhile, keeping an eye on our surroundings. Since Rabbits were the only monsters we had to be wary of in these parts, I figured those two would suffice as guard duty.

"..."

"Hmm..."

"...Hmmm..."

Twenty minutes had passed, and I hadn't so much as gotten a nibble.

"...No sign of any fish."

While I certainly hadn't expected things to be smooth sailing, fishing seemed to require far more patience than I thought.

"Mm."

"...♪"

"Aren't you guys bored?"

Sakura and Olto were still staring at the spot where my line was cast. Didn't they get tired of just watching?

"Mm?"

"...?"

In response, they tilted their heads a fraction before returning their gaze to the same spot. *Okay then. As long as you're not complaining.*

"All right! I got a hit!" Roqué yelled jubilantly as he reeled in his catch. A black fish dangled from the end of his hook.

"Heh heh, got my first catch!"

Name: Begini Trout
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 6★
Effect: Ingredient. Edible.

“Begini trout, huh?”

Guessed that meant it was a trout for beginners. It looked exactly like a regular trout, though, not to mention it had a decent amount of flesh on it.

“Looks tasty,” I commented.

“It is. Broil it or have it as sashimi—tastes good either way!”
Roqué replied.

“Huh? You can eat it raw?”

“Of course.”

In real life, freshwater fish weren’t meant to be eaten raw since there was a high chance of them being infected with parasites. Although there were a few restaurants that did serve them raw, that was only possible because the fish had been bred or prepared a certain way. However, those rules didn’t seem to apply to LJO. I supposed the devs had deemed it unnecessary to recreate that aspect for in-game fish. Seeing Roqué actually catch something filled me with envy and gave me a fresh burst of motivation.

“I’m gonna catch something too, just you wait!”

“Good luck, mister!”

Unfortunately, the next thirty minutes were just as uneventful. Although my float seemed to bob every now and then, it was either my eyes playing tricks on me, or a ripple caused by a fish getting away clean with my bait.

“Yeehaw! Got another one!”

“Rats...”

Roqué had already caught his third fish. Even though I knew his skill level was much higher than mine, I couldn’t help feeling frustrated.

“Still no luck?”

“Damn it! Just you wait. I’ll catch a big one, I swear!”

With laser-sharp focus, I concentrated all of my attention on my grip. Finally, the moment I had long been waiting for arrived. Feeling my rod quiver, I immediately reeled in my line.

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Hell yeah!”

A tiny fish dangled from the end of my hook. When I say tiny, I mean *teeny-weeny*. It had to be at least two sizes smaller than the begini trout Roqué had caught.

Name: Begini Dace

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Ingredient. Edible.

“Looks like you got yourself a begini dace.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not at all. Tastes pretty decent. Not as good as begini trout, though, plus it sells for less.”

While it wasn't exactly trash fish, its value paled in comparison to trout. I didn't mind, though. This was my first-ever catch; you bet I was going to cook it up and eat it afterwards.

“I'll catch a begini trout next!”

“I'm sure you will. Good luck.”

Catching that dace had raised my Fishing skill by two levels, which gave me hope that my next attempt would be more successful. As expected, actually catching something was the key to gaining more XP. Another thing that had become apparent was the fact that this fishing spot wasn't meant for beginners. Under normal circumstances, it was highly unlikely that a single fish could raise your skill two levels in such a short amount of time. This place had to be for intermediate fishers, which explained why it was more difficult to catch fish. On the plus side, it also meant you could gain more XP per catch.

I continued fishing for a while longer and caught two begini daces and one begini trout. While it wasn't exactly a big haul, it wasn't too shabby for a first attempt either. My Fishing skill had also increased to level 4 as a result.

“...!”

“Hm?” I strained my ears to listen. I could have sworn I heard a voice. “Did you hear something, Roqué?”

“Yeah. I heard someone yell.”

Apparently, Roqué had heard it too.

“How about you, Rick?”

“Chirp?”

Rick was grooming himself absentmindedly. It didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary had crossed his radar. Regardless, I set down my fishing pole and cast a watchful eye on our surroundings. The next instant, I spotted several figures running down from upriver. They jumped from stone to stone, racing towards us at a tremendous speed.

“AAAAAGH!”

“Run, you fools, run!”

“Is it still after us?!”

“No idea!”

Judging by the color of their markers, they appeared to be players. The four figures looked scared out of their wits, glancing over their shoulders every now and then as they ran. Were they being chased? I didn't see or sense anything coming after them, though... Just then, the group seemed to notice us.

"There's someone over there!"

"No shit! Hey!"

"Get out of here!"

The players yelled at me frantically, seemingly unaware that they were no longer being pursued.

"Hey! What's going on?" I yelled back.

"We're being chased by a seriously effed-up monster!"

I knew it. Considering these people were generally well equipped, it had to be a pretty formidable opponent. If it had been me, I probably would have died instantly. We were currently at the outermost part of the forest, though, and the only monsters that roamed here were Rabbits. Rick showed no signs of hinting at danger, nor could I see anything behind the group. They seemed to have succeeded at shaking off their pursuer.

"I don't see anything after you!"

"What?"

"Did we manage to lose it?"

"Come to think of it..."

At my reply, the players began to slow down. Relief spread across their faces once they turned around and saw that the danger had passed.

"We're saved..."

"That was scary as hell..."

All four of them went weak in the knees and sank to the ground. What had they seen?

"You guys okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for stopping us when you did. We were already at our limits."

"We owe you one."

"Never mind that. What happened?"

No sooner had I asked than the players began talking all at once. They were probably desperate to relay their terrifying tale to anyone willing to listen.

"We heard that you could find ores upriver, so we decided to check it out," one of the players began.

"From what we were told, the monsters in that area weren't supposed to be that powerful either..."

"At first, we only encountered the usual mobs that you typically find in Zone Two."

“But while mining, we were suddenly ambushed by a *huge* bear!”

“It was well over three meters tall.”

“Yeah, not to mention its eyes were bloodshot. That scared the crap outta me.”

“It also had this weird black mist coming out of its body.”

“Our thief got killed by its first blow. After that, we ran like hell. It was all we could do to escape.”

These people were by no means weak, given that the enemies in Zone Two posed no threat to them. And yet, they had been forced to flee for their lives. Just how strong was this bear anyway? While Thieves usually dressed lightly, their companion had to have been fairly well equipped, judging from the strength of their party. Still, surprise attack or not, this bear had succeeded at killing them with one blow. A monster that powerful clearly had no business being here. I now understood why they had been running with such reckless abandon. Players like Thieves were usually in charge of detecting enemies; since they had ended up respawning, the party's reconnaissance powers had suffered greatly. As a result, the remaining members were unable to tell whether the bear was still after them or not, leaving them with no choice but to keep running.

“Brr. I can still hear the sound of its teeth gnashing behind me.”

“I thought I was gonna piss myself.”

They mentioned that the bear had been emitting a black mist from its body. That sounded eerily similar to the black Rabbit we had fought.

“To tell the truth, that sounds a lot like the Rabbit we ran into earlier. It didn't drop anything when we defeated it, although we did get event points...” I recounted our story to the group.

“Does that mean the bear we encountered has something to do with this event?”

“In that case, it would make sense why such a ridiculously strong monster popped up out of nowhere.”

“Hmm. So basically, we gotta defeat that thing if we wanna clear this event?”

“Doubt that's possible unless we coordinate a raid or something.”

“If it's something you can encounter under normal circumstances, then it can't be a raid monster.”

“True... We might have a shot at it if we pick the strongest players in this server and form a team.”

It didn't seem like these players intended to keep this information to themselves, as they began discussing how to relay their findings to the others and ask for their cooperation.

“We'll probably have to fight it a few times to determine its attack patterns.”

“Whoever goes first is bound to respawn, though, dontcha think? Could even be a total party wipe.”

“Guess not many players would be willing to take that chance...”

Players who died during this event would end up respawning in front of the guild in the square. In lieu of the usual death penalties, you’d lose ten to thirty percent of the event points you owned. Whoever took on the role of fighting the black bear risked losing their hard-earned event points. I doubted many people would be willing to undertake such a risky mission. While I wasn’t able to help them, having no friends or acquaintances on this server, I wished them all the best in their endeavors. I didn’t mind putting my life on the line just once either, if only my team weren’t too weak to be of any practical use. As I contemplated various scenarios, the sole woman of the group suddenly glanced over at me.

“I know! Why don’t we have Silver-Haired help us?!” the mage-like woman cried out. Although I didn’t mind helping them, I doubted I’d be of much use. *Also, so much for trying to remain anonymous.*

“Huh? *Silver-Haired*? Seriously? You mean this guy’s *the* Silver-Haired?” one of the guys gaped.

“That’s right! You are, aren’t you?” the woman nudged me.

“I might be, I guess.”

I wish people would stop calling me that...

“I’ve seen you before! Besides, there’s no mistaking that little munchkin over there!” the woman continued.

“Huh? What about that bear?”

“You mean you don’t know? That’s Silver-Haired’s monster, Bear Bear! They’re *super* famous among bear lovers!”

Wow, I hadn’t expected her to know Bear Bear’s name as well. I supposed it would have only been a matter of time before Bear Bear became a household name; bear lovers were apt to find them irresistible. Evidently, the same couldn’t be said for the mysterious black bear, though.

“Loads of Tamers have started taming Little Bears and Honey Bees, you know, after falling for Bear Bear’s cuteness.”

Say *what*? That was news to me. Honey Bears were listed on Amimin’s page, though, so I guessed it wasn’t surprising that other Tamers wanted one as well. After all, they were practically a living, breathing teddy bear.

“Also, look at that cutie!” the woman cried, pointing at Olto.

“That kid a monster too?” one of the men asked, puzzled.

“Silver-Haired and gnomes are practically synonymous! Don’t you know that?!”

“Nuh-uh.”

“News to me.”

The men seemed to know very little about me. All they knew was that there was a Tamer known as Silver-Haired notorious for his unusual playstyle. *Thank goodness.* A boring old person like me couldn't be *that* famous, could I? I was simply well-known among a handful of info-savvy people and players who loved cute things, right?

"Okay, okay. We get that the guy over there's Silver-Haired," one of the men raised his hands in defeat.

"And you?" the woman eyed the remaining two guys.

"S-Sure thing."

"We get it."

"Good!"

Why did *she* seem so smug? Oh well, not that it really mattered.

"Anyway, whaddya mean, we should ask Silver-Haired to help us?" one of the guys asked. *Nice one, dude.* I'd been meaning to ask that myself.

"Silver-Haired's tamed monsters have a wide fan base. It's not just Bear Bear—the others have lots of fans too," the woman explained. *Wait, seriously?* I did think it was kinda weird that so many people were staring or waving at us, but I hadn't expected there to be so many secret admirers. I was sure our fame would be short-lived, though; other players were bound to tame honey bears and gnomes eventually. I'd only end up embarrassing myself if I started behaving like other famous players. It was best to just bask in our glory while it lasted.

"There are plenty of fans on this server as well. I was chatting with a few people in the square about how lucky we were to be on the same server as you," the woman beamed.

"I see," I smiled back awkwardly.

"If you talked to those players for us, they'd probably be willing to help us out. Then they could spread the word to even more people!"

I doubted it would be that easy. Still, I was willing to lend them a hand, especially as it seemed like this would affect future developments.

"Not sure how much I'll be able to help you, but I'll do what I can," I told the woman.

"Awesome! Let's head back to the village then!"

"Good idea. We gotta fetch our pal too."

Although the party members seemed eager to get going now that I'd agreed to help them, I couldn't just pick up and leave.

"Gimme a sec," I said. I didn't mind heading back since I'd already caught some fish, but I wasn't sure about Roqué. He was here on business, after all. I glanced at him and found him lost in thought, a solemn expression on his face. After a few moments, he looked up and announced that he was going back too.

“I gotta return to the village and tell everyone about that monster,” he declared.

“Okay. Let’s head back together then.”

“Sounds good!”

By the time we returned to the village, the sun had almost set below the horizon. Roqué and I shook hands at the entrance and bid each other goodbye.

“Thanks for all your help.”

“Don’t mention it. We’re fishing buddies now!”

Despite being only a beginner, I had apparently gotten his stamp of approval.

“See ya later!” Roqué grinned and waved at me as he walked away. He made a pretty picture, strolling along the sunset boulevard with his straw hat and fishing pole slung over his shoulder. It imbued me with an odd sense of nostalgia. I felt like I could watch him all day—not that I could, as there were more pressing matters to attend to.

“Let’s head to the square. That’s where most players are likely to be,” the woman proposed.

“You’re right.”

Regardless of whether we intended to defeat the bear, we had to spread the news to as many people as possible before it was too late.

After splitting up with Roqué, our group hurried onwards to the village square, introducing ourselves to each other on the way. The woman who declared herself Bear Bear’s number one fan was Marca, and the other three were, uh... Never mind them. They left so little of an impression that I didn’t see the point in remembering their names.

“Well, we’re back. What now?” I asked the group. How were we supposed to inform all these players in the square about the black bear? Grab a megaphone and start yelling? That wasn’t really my thing, to be honest.

“Let’s see... Over there,” Marca said, heading towards a tent set up near the center of the square. She seemed to have a plan.

“Hello?”

“Yes? Did somebody call me?”

In response to Marca’s greeting, a familiar purple-haired player immediately emerged from within the tent. It was Siegfried, the guy famous for role-playing as a knight. He was also one of the three titleholders, which made me feel a close affinity with him.

“Ah, you must be Marca, right? What’s up?”

“We’ve got something to share with you, Siegfried. It might get the event rolling again.”

“Really?! That’s wonderful!”

“First, I’d like you and the others to hear what we have to say. One of my companions has gone to fetch Kokuten.”

“Very well. By the way, I don’t believe we’ve met yet,” Siegfried said, flashing his signature princely smile as he turned to face me.



“N-No, guess not. I’m Yuto, a Tamer,” I stuttered in reply.

“And I’m Siegfried, the wandering knight. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’ve always wanted to meet you, you know.”

“...You know me?”

“Of course. You and I are both titleholders, plus, it’s a well-known fact that the Silver-Haired Pioneer has a gnome!”

So he did know who I was. Well, he didn’t seem like a bad dude, nor did he appear to be mocking my title, so that was a relief.

“I’ve heard nothing but great things about you from Akari. You have no idea how much I’ve been looking forward to this day.”

“G-Good to hear that.”

Come to think of it, Akari did mention that they were acquaintances. I gave Siegfried a once-over now that we were standing face-to-face. Even from afar, he had struck me as the princely type; up close, he was ridiculously handsome. How were his lashes that long anyway?! Even though my avatar was supposed to be just as good-looking, I paled in comparison next to him. Was it the way he carried himself? He was hella fine, and I bet he had a really great personality too. There didn’t seem to be a mean bone in his body. *Damn it! If only I were this charming and attractive in real life!*

As I wallowed in my silent defeat, Marca’s companion returned with another player. I hadn’t known this, but apparently, this newcomer was the leader of the highest-ranking party in this server, which was composed of top-level frontliners. Although I found it strange that a powerful party like theirs wasn’t participating in the Martial Arts Tournament, it seemed like PvP battles didn’t interest them. Other players respected their group and regarded them as some of the central figures of this server. The player named Kokuten was clad from head to toe in black, giving off an incredibly intimidating aura.

“Um, h-hello?”

Although I was hesitant to greet him at first, he immediately smiled politely and greeted me back.

“Oh, hello. My name’s Kokuten. Pleased to meet you.”

Hang on, I’d recognize that attitude anywhere. His familiar manner instantly put me at ease.

“I’m Yuto, a Tamer. Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

“Likewise.”

He had to be a working adult in real life, his mannerisms reminiscent of how salespeople exchanged business cards with each other. This calmed my nerves. He seemed to be thinking the same thing, smiling sheepishly as he scratched his head.

“I can’t help bowing, even though we’re in a game,” he chuckled.

“I feel you. That’s why I try not to use honorifics in-game.”

“Ha ha, that’s actually a good idea. Speaking like I would at the office is pretty much second nature for me, though.”

With the arrival of Kokuten, Marca saw it fit to kick off the meeting. She began recounting the details of the giant bear that had attacked her group, such as the location of the encounter, its strength, and the black mist engulfing its body. Siegfried and Kokuten seemed particularly interested in the last detail, although apparently, this wasn’t the first time they had heard of it.

“A black mist, eh? I actually received a few reports today from players who’ve encountered monsters fitting your description,” Kokuten mused.

“I also battled a black Rabbit like that. It didn’t drop any items when I defeated it—all I got was event points,” I chimed in.

“I had a similar experience myself. I fought a Monitor Lizard shrouded in black mist in the heart of the forest. I’m quite positive that some sort of event is underway.” Siegfried nodded in response to our anecdotes. It looked like we weren’t the only ones who had been noticing strange occurrences.

“Still, I’d never heard of a giant bear before now,” Kokuten murmured.

“Me neither. You wouldn’t happen to have a video, would you, Marca?” Siegfried asked.

“Fear not, I have it right here. It’s not that long, but I managed to get a clear shot of the bear.”

I took a look at the video with Siegfried and Kokuten, stunned by the intensity of it. The video began with Marca’s companion being ambushed by the bear, prompting the rest of the group to flee for their lives. Whenever the cameraperson glanced over their shoulder, the bear was hot on their trail, fangs bared menacingly. The sound of the bear’s growling and teeth-gnashing amidst the players’ ragged breathing and screams lent a sense of urgency to the whole situation. There was a chilling surreality to the scene that reminded me of a found footage suspense thriller that had been popular a while back.

“This is incredible. And there’s that black mist, clear as day,” Kokuten commented.

“Indeed. To think that a frontliner would get killed off in a single blow, though...” Siegfried winced.

“True that. Even with the added bonus of an ambush and critical hit, a monster shouldn’t have that much power unless it were—”

“Boss level,” Marca finished. Kokuten and Siegfried looked troubled at the implication. Even for them, this bear appeared to be a formidable foe.

“Think your party can beat this thing, Kokuten?” Marca asked. He furrowed his brow.

“Hmm... To be honest, I’m not sure. We don’t even know what kinds of abilities this bear has yet.”

“Figured... Guess we’ve no choice but to fight it a few times and figure out its attack patterns,” Marca sighed.

“Even so, you risk a party wipe if you’re not careful. I don’t believe it’s a good idea for your team to face this creature alone, Marca,” Siegfried warned.

“I know. That’s why I’m thinking of putting out a call for volunteers.”

Having said that, Marca began sharing her plan with us. Her strategy was to ask around and recruit volunteers who were willing to put their lives on the line, i.e., offer themselves as a sacrifice. Since respawning would result in the loss of event points, she hoped to gather as many willing participants as possible so no one would have to die more than once.

“For this plan to work, I need the help of well-known players like you two. Silver-Haired here has also promised to help us,” Marca concluded.

“Well, I’m useless when it comes to fighting, so this is the least I can do,” I added sheepishly.

“Understood. Either way, it doesn’t seem like we can avoid a fight. Let my party handle the first battle. I’m pretty sure everyone will agree to it. After all, our party’s main objective is to fight powerful monsters.” Kokuten volunteered. His party appeared to be made up of members who enjoyed hunting monsters in LJO. So that was why they had opted out of participating in the Martial Arts Tournament.

“Very well, I’ll ask my acquaintances too. I don’t mind forming a temporary party for this purpose.”

As expected, Siegfried was equally eager to lend a hand. With the cooperation of two central figures like him and Kokuten, I was sure we’d be able to recruit plenty of volunteers, while the rest of us did our own thing. Marca’s group would basically do all the talking while my monsters and I acted as a walking billboard. I watched the others disperse in search of potential volunteers, deciding to wait in front of the guild for their return. In the meantime, I looked through my newly obtained ingredients, thinking about what to make next. Acquiring some fish had opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp!”

“...♪”

My monsters were huddled around something on the ground in a

circle. I peered over their shoulders and saw a mound of dirt in the center with a stick protruding from it. Each of them took turns scraping away some dirt with their hands. It seemed like they were playing pole toppling, a game I used to play often as a kid.

“Mm... Mm-mm.”

“Growl...”

“...Chirp chirp!”

“...♪”

Everyone except Sakura looked deadly serious. Olto, Bear Bear, and Rick were overcautious in their movements, taking their time to scrape away the dirt and wiping the sweat from their foreheads after each turn. Looking at them, you’d think their lives depended on it—not that being serious about a game was a bad thing. However, after several rounds, Sakura was the one who emerged victorious.

Ultimately, it was probably best not to try too hard, and just take things easy. Who knew I would actually learn the meaning of life from watching my monsters play...? Damn, that was deep. As I was killing time with my companions, Marca returned, with several other players in tow.

“Thanks for waiting. I brought some people who seemed interested in our cause,” Marca announced. All ten players accompanying her appeared to be women.

“That’s a lot of people,” I commented.

“They’re all fans of your monsters, Silver-Haired!”

“*All* of them?”

“Yep!”

Sure enough, every single person had their eyes glued to my companions playing next to me, seemingly besotted by them. They soon snapped out of their reverie, however, remembering their actual purpose.

“Oops, sorry... My bad. It’s not every day I get to see Gnomey up close.”

The woman who had just spoken appeared to be a fan of Olto.

“So, what did you want to talk to us about?” she continued unexpectedly.

“Huh? Didn’t Marca tell you?” I shot Marca a look.

“Well, I figured it’d be easier to explain things once everyone had arrived. For the time being, I just told everyone that you wanted to have a word with them,” she replied.

“And you guys agreed to that?” I gazed at the sea of faces around me.

“If you’re here, that means Olto’s bound to be with you, right?”

“As if I’d pass up the chance to see Bear Bear up close!”

“Rick is adorable. I wanna cuddle him so bad.”

“Ngggh, I want a little sister like Sakura.”

Never underestimate the power of cuteness. Once we had gotten their attention, I showed the players the footage of the giant bear while Marca recounted the sequence of events that had led to this gathering. We told them that we were looking for volunteers willing to face the beast together and that the situation entailed fighting it a few times at the very least, as well as the fact that respawning was almost a given. As expected, the crowd’s reaction was less than favorable. I could hardly blame them, though; nobody in their right mind would willingly rush towards their death. The video of the bear seemed to incite fear in their hearts. Regardless of how each individual felt about the matter, there was also the question of whether they’d be able to persuade the remaining members of their parties to take part. This was where I came in, although there was really only one thing I could do.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but won’t you consider helping us? Come on, guys, say please.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Growl.”

“Chirp.”

“...”

The crowd of female players squealed in delight as my monsters and I lined up in a row and bowed in unison. I had to admit this was a pretty dirty tactic to use. How could you possibly say no to these sweet, earnest faces? Judging from the women’s looks of anguish, my plan seemed to be working. If the roles were reversed and one of my favorite idol singers were to beg sweetly for something, I was certain I’d be willing to do anything for her. In fact, I wouldn’t hesitate to give her my checkbook. That being said, I felt a little guilty being the one doing the asking. Perhaps I should have given this role more thought before accepting it.

“This goes without saying, but Silver-Haired has agreed to help us too,” Marca added, as if to add fuel to the fire. While I wasn’t sure how much help we would be, I didn’t intend to sit back and watch from afar while everyone else did all the heavy lifting either.

“Um, I don’t mind cooperating since I’m a solo player,” one of the women suddenly piped up.

“Thank you so much, Amelia!” Marca gushed. I had been curious about that woman too. To my surprise, she turned out to be a Tamer like me. She was a blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty, her hair done up in two bunches on each side of her head, probably a human. Her tamed monsters were a Heart Rabbit, which was a rabbit-type monster I didn’t recognize, a Honey Bee, a Little Bear, a Jet-Black Squirrel, and a War Dog. Clearly, she had a thing for furry creatures.

“Pleased to meet you, Silver-Haired. I’m Amelia, a Beast Tamer. As much as I love furry animals, I also adore Olto!” she beamed.

“Th-That so?” I stuttered.

“Olto really is adorable! So are Rick, Bear Bear, and Sakura! I’m impressed that you managed to gather so many cute monsters, Silver-Haired! I envy you!”

I wasn’t sure how to react, considering she was undoubtedly a higher-ranking player than I was. On top of having undergone a class change, several of her monsters had evolved into new species as well.

“There’s just one teeny, tiny favor I’d like to ask you...” Amelia continued. *A trade, huh?* I wondered what it was she wanted. Money? Actually, she might ask to exchange friend codes, so that she could play with Olto. I didn’t want to have to exchange friend codes with *all* of the players here, though. If word of this got out, other people might start bullying me into becoming friends with them too. However, what Amelia requested was something totally unexpected.

“Please let me take a screenshot of Olto. One photo is all I’m asking for!”

“Huh? A screenshot?”

“Yes. I’d like to get a cute photo of him posing in that flower garden over there. Just one pic!”

The minute Amelia suggested that, the atmosphere of the crowd changed drastically. All eyes were suddenly fixated on my monsters with a fierce intensity.

“Sh-She gets to take a screenshot *and* choose a pose...?”

“Imagine Bear Bear posing cutely...”

“Gulp.”

Immediately, everyone turned to look at me. *Yikes! What was with all this pressure?! And you, Marca! Who said you could join them?! Wait a minute—a screenshot, though?* Was that really all they were asking for? If that was all it took for them to cooperate, I was more than happy to indulge them.

“O-Okay. Just one pic, though. If the rest of you are willing to help as well, you’re also free to choose any one of my monsters and take a screenshot of them,” I said to the group. While that hardly sounded like a fair exchange to me, it seemed to do the trick; my announcement caused an immediate uproar among the women.

“All riiight!”

“Let’s do this!”

“I’ll convince my teammates no matter what!”

“Won’t take no for an answer... Heh heh heh.”

“I’m so glad I was assigned to this server!”

My monsters flinched at the sudden outburst, unsure whether the crowd was mad or excited. At any rate, it looked like we could expect

a few volunteers to join our cause.

“Woo-hoo! That’s a promise, okay?! Give me a call once you’ve finalized your plan!” Amelia whooped.

“Will do. We’re counting on you,” I replied.

“Oh boy, I’ve just *got* to nail the perfect shot! I’ll need to work out the best possible composition and scenario!” Amelia sighed dreamily. Seeing how she was already lost in her own little world, it didn’t seem like we’d have to worry about her going back on her word. Just then, Marca suddenly drew near me, her expression dead serious. Wh-What did she want?

“Obviously, I have the right to take a screenshot too, don’t I?” she pressed.

“Y-Yeah, sure thing. I don’t mind.”

“I knew you’d say that! Mwa ha ha. I’m coming for you, Bear Bear...”

After agreeing to meet up in front of the guild again before noon the following day, we each went our separate ways. It looked like my job was done.

“I’ll leave the rest to Siegfried and Kokuten.”

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 5

“Why do we have to sleep in the open air?!”

“It’s not like we have a choice! There’s no space to put up any tents!”

“And why not?!”

“Cause some dumbasses are hogging the square, that’s why! I tried asking them to give us some space, but they ignored me!”

“The inn’s fully booked too... Isn’t there any other place we can stay?”

“I tried asking some NPCs as well, but apparently, they don’t wanna let strangers into their homes.”

“The devs must be crazy! What were they thinking?!”

“Like I’d know! Instead of just sitting there and complaining, why don’t you go find someplace yourself?!”

“I’m *trying*, doofus! But I can’t find anywhere to stay! There was this run-down cabin on the outskirts of the village which I thought would be empty for sure, but then this super scary old man came out and asked me if I was an outsider! Like, what the heck? I bet he’s some sort of serial killer!”

“...At this rate, we’re gonna have to sleep outdoors again. That, or camp outside the village and be on our guard all night.”

“No thanks! I’ve had it up to here with this event! I’m leaving!”

“L-Leave...? But once you drop out of the event, you won’t be able

to come back!”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass! This event can go to hell for all I care! See ya!”

“Hey, wait! ...Damn it!”

Chapter Three: A Change in the Guardian Beast

Day four of the event.

“Think they’ll be home today?” I asked Olto. After taking care of all our chores, we had decided to pay a visit to Batz the mushroom gatherer, who had been out the day before.

“Mmm.”

“Hello? Anybody home?”

“Mm-mm.”

Thankfully, we seemed to have caught them at a good time today, as we got a reply almost instantly.

“Coming. Who is it?” Batz called out, answering the door.

“Hi, I’m Yuto, a traveler. So actually, I...” I began, letting Batz know that Cayenne had referred me to them and asking if they were willing to sell me some mushrooms. To my delight, Batz agreed, as long as I fulfilled their conditions. It wasn’t a hard task to complete with Olto on my side thankfully. All I had to do was take care of some mushrooms, and I would get some for free.

Although it took a while to get the job done, it was definitely worth the incredible discovery I made, as Batz, to my surprise, taught me how to make broth from dried mushrooms. According to them, you could make broth by soaking dried sirishrooms in water. I was pretty sure you could make mushroom stock that way in real life too. While I’d never actually seen someone try it, I’d read about it in a cooking manga before. I had a feeling—no, *conviction*—that my miso soup was about to become ten times better.

“Think I’ll give it a try as soon as we get home.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Growl.”

I found myself skipping along the road, unable to contain my excitement. Olto and Bear Bear, who had been walking next to me, joined in as well, and the three of us skipped the rest of the way back to Cayenne’s house. Although it was well before noon, I figured it was best to get the preparations for dinner out of the way while I had time. The great thing about games was that you could enjoy a nice warm meal anytime as long as you stored them in your inventory. The first dish I was going to prepare was, of course, miso soup. After all, I had mushrooms *and* fish, which would undoubtedly create a flavorful

base.

“I already have dried mushrooms. Just gotta figure out what to do with the fish.”

Since it was unlikely that I'd be able to make a stock from fresh fish, I decided to apply a drying art to them instead. Once dried, my begini dace transformed into an item named Small Dried Fish, and my begini trout into Overnight Dried Freshwater Fish. Was the difference in their names due to size? *Eh, whatever.* As long as they were dried, I ought to be able to make stock. While I was at it, I figured I might as well go all out. I added some purified water, dried fish, and dried sirishrooms to a pot. Once the mixture came to a boil, the contents of the pot underwent a change. The dried fish and sirishrooms disappeared, and the remaining purified water transformed into an item called Soup Stock. My experiment was a success. There was still room for improvement, though, given that the quality wasn't very high.

I then added some blue carrots, cabbavege, ultramarine eggplants, and Attack Boar meat that I bought from Cacal the hunter to the stock. I had grilled some of the Attack Boar meat the night before, and it had tasted almost exactly like pork. The meat was very lean and a bit on the tough side, but I quite liked it.

“Once I've let it simmer for a while, though...”

The end result was a pork miso soup with a frightening array of blue vegetables in it. While it didn't look very appetizing, its effects were astounding.

Name: Pork and Vegetable Miso Soup

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 7★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 23%. Increases auto-recovery rate of HP for two hours. Boosts Endurance and Sanity by 2 for two hours.

I hadn't expected it to be *this* impressive. People would probably pay good money for this item. Eating it gave you several buffs, not to mention it tasted great. I, for one, would definitely buy it.

“Wh-Whoa. Stock's amazing.”

Next, I finally made pizza, which I had been dying to make for ages. This, too, blew my expectations out of the water. First, I made some tomato sauce. After chopping up some white tomatoes, I simmered them in a saucepan along with a dash of olive oil. Once the mixture had been reduced to a thick consistency, I seasoned it with salt and pepper to taste. *Voilà.* My white tomato sauce, which resembled béchamel sauce, was ready. Given the subpar results last time, I made sure to peel the tomatoes first and cook the sauce over a

low heat. Thankfully, the final product had a five-star rating, making the extra effort worthwhile. I then spread the sauce over the rolled-out dough and topped it with olive oil, white tomatoes, ultramarine eggplants, basilil, and shredded cheese before popping it into the oven.

“Wonder how the cheese will turn out? Can’t wait.”

I ended up with the following:

Name: Pizza (One Slice)

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 13%. Decreases cost of MP by 8% for two hours.

This item wasn’t that useful for me since I only ever used Aqua Ball, but for an actual mage, it would probably be highly valuable. I was sensing a common thread here: the more ingredients used, the more potent the effects.

“Maybe I’ll increase the toppings when I make pizza tonight.”

Miso soup was another dish that was easy to bulk up. It was possible that I could expect an even more powerful buff by adding a wider variety of ingredients. On my way to the square in front of the guild, I considered different combinations and cooking methods. When I arrived, I was surprised to find Marca, Siegfried, and Kokuten already there, standing in a circle with their heads bent low. *Hang on.* If I wasn’t mistaken, we weren’t supposed to meet up for another thirty minutes... Or had I gotten the time wrong?

“Sorry I’m late,” I apologized to the group. The three of them immediately waved off my apology.

“Not at all. In fact, you’re early.”

“Since we’re all camped here, it’s kind of inevitable that we run into each other.”

“Ah, so that’s why.”

Unlike me, the others had already been in this square from the beginning. It wouldn’t be strange for them to get together ahead of time and engage in friendly chitchat.

“Besides, even if you were late, I doubt any of us would complain,” Kokuten said.

“Indeed. Not after all you’ve done for us, Yuto.” Siegfried added.

“What do you mean?” I asked, utterly mystified. I’d barely lifted a finger.

“To tell the truth, we had quite a few players sign up for the expedition this morning,” Siegfried replied.

“There must’ve been at least fifty of them,” Kokuten added. Additionally, more than half of the volunteers had mentioned my

name. It seemed like the women I met yesterday had succeeded in convincing their teammates. “Now that you’ve done your part, it’s time we do ours.”

“That’s right, you can relax now. Pray that we return with good news,” Siegfried said cheerfully.

“Huh? What about me?” I looked at them quizzically. I had fully intended to fight as well, being one of the people who had proposed this venture.

“Well, the thing is...” Kokuten paused. Was it something he couldn’t say out loud? *Ah, I get it.* It was a well-known fact that my team wasn’t built for battle; perhaps he thought I wouldn’t be of any use. Nevertheless, he was much too polite to actually say “there’s no point in a noob like you fighting” to my face. However, I hadn’t been prepared for what he *did* say next.

“Actually, I’d considered asking you to fight the third or fourth round, but...I got shot down.”

“Shot down? By whom?”

“The majority of the female players. They’re all fans of your monsters, and they couldn’t seem to bear the thought of them respawning. I guess I kind of got, well, intimidated...” Kokuten sighed as he began explaining what happened, his expression one of utmost misery. It seemed like the women had given him a rough time. Imagining the scene sent a shiver down my spine, and I shuddered involuntarily. Various incidents I had experienced at work flashed through my mind. In Japan, there’s a saying that the four most terrifying things in life are earthquakes, thunder, fires, and fathers, but personally, nothing was scarier than women uniting under a common cause. *Also, props to LJO for recreating chills.*

“Besides, I feel bad for asking you to fight when you’ve already helped us recruit so many volunteers.”

“Well, as long as you guys are okay with that.”

After all, it wasn’t as if I wanted to die that badly. While chatting with Kokuten, I caught a glimpse of the Obelisk of Return in the square glowing faintly. Someone appeared to have respawned.

“Hey, didn’t we see that party yesterday?”

“They’re the third group to fight the bear.”

“Wait, you mean you’ve already started?”

“Yeah. My party has already died once.”

Not wanting to waste time, Kokuten’s team had apparently taken on the giant bear this morning—the first group to go. Like prior reports suggested, they had encountered the creature upriver. I hadn’t expected them to act so quickly. *Talk about efficient.* Top players were on a whole nother level.

“How’d it go?”

“As it stands, our chances are pretty slim. We only got it thirty percent down before we were wiped. That being said, it shouldn’t be impossible to defeat it once we figure out its patterns.”

That was reassuring. *What now, though?* I had been planning on fighting the bear too, but since that plan had been scrapped, I now had a bit of extra time on my hands.

“Maybe I’ll check out some quests at the guild.”

As soon as I stepped inside the building, I heard someone call out to me.

“Silver-Haired! Yoo-hoo!”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Amelia.”

The person was none other than Amelia, lover of gnomes and fluffy things.

“Hi there!” she greeted me, running over with her monsters. After making small talk, I found out that she, too, had faced the bear and been mercilessly sent to her death.

“Honestly, I was no match for it!” she grinned sheepishly.

“Seriously?”

“My monsters did their very best, but it was over before we knew it.”

“Pwee...”

“Chirp...”

In response, Amelia’s monsters drooped their heads miserably. They seemed to be beating themselves up for losing. My companions trotted over to their side, intent on comforting them.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp!”

Olto patted the rabbit on its shoulder (back?), and Rick rubbed noses with the squirrel.

“Growl growl.”

“...♪”

Bear Bear seemed to have reached some sort of unspoken agreement with the Honey Bee and Little Bear, while Sakura scratched the War Dog under its chin repeatedly. Perhaps there were certain things that only monsters could understand. I was glad to see them get along so well.

“Are you going to take on a quest, Silver-Haired?”

“If I can find one that’s doable.”

I was about to check out the quest notice board when the receptionist stopped me.

“Excuse me. You’re the traveler who was with Roqué yesterday, right?” she asked.

“Huh? I mean, yeah.”

How did she know? *Oh, duh.* Of course, the villagers would have

seen us walking together.

"I hate to break it to you, but Roqué and two other children seem to have gone missing. Since you're the last person he talked to, I wanted to ask if you knew anything about his disappearance."

"But that can't be. He said he was either gonna visit the guild or the chief's house when we last spoke."

He did mention wanting to inform the villagers about the giant bear. This was news to the receptionist, though. Her eyes went wide as I recounted the details to her—apparently, she hadn't heard anything of the sort.

"Really? I could've sworn he said he was gonna report to the guild, though."

"Speaking of, what was this giant bear like?"

"I didn't actually see it myself, but from what I've heard, it's a pretty huge monster. The people who saw it encountered it upriver."

"I see..."

The receptionist fell silent, seemingly lost in thought. What on earth was going on here? Only one thing was certain: Roqué had kept the bear a secret from the villagers.

"Um, would you be willing to look for the children? We've already sent out a search party, but I'm afraid there aren't enough people."

Did this count as an emergency search quest? I had been meaning to attempt a quest anyway, so the timing couldn't have been better. Nothing popped up in front of me, though, so it didn't seem to be an actual quest—more like a simple plea for help. Considering how much Roqué had done for me, however, I had absolutely no reason to refuse.

"I'll help look for them too," Amelia offered.

"You sure? This doesn't count as a quest, so I doubt we'll be getting any rewards for it."

"I don't mind. Besides, this sounds like it might have something to do with the event! I'll go spread the word!"

She had a point: this didn't seem like an isolated incident. The more people we could secure, the better. Since she had more connections, I let Amelia handle the talking while I headed off in search of Roqué.

"Might as well start with places that seem probable."

I decided to stop by Roqué's workplace first, the fishing spot we had visited the previous day. That was the only place outside the village I could think of that had anything to do with him.

"You guys keep an eye out for Roqué too, okay? Who knows, we might just bump into him on the way."

"Mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

“...!”

Although I was hopeful when we left the village, the search for Roqué proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. We called his name and surveyed the terrain with our skills, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Hmm. No sign of him. Any luck?”

“Chirp.”

“Growl.”

I should’ve known this wouldn’t be easy. Though each of us possessed a skill that could be used to find someone—Vigilance (Rick), Smelling (Bear Bear), and Presence Detection (me)—none of us came even remotely close to finding Roqué. The only living beings we encountered were monsters. Since Rabbits were supposed to be the only creatures that spawned in this area, fighting them should have been a breeze. However...

“Where’d all these Little Devils and weird Rabbits come from—Watch out!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Th-Thanks, Olto!”

“Mm!”

After saving me from the charging Rabbit, Olto gave me a thumbs-up, not even looking back. *Gosh, what a man!* These encounters were a bad sign, though; there hadn’t been any Little Devils in this area yesterday. Not only that, but we had already encountered the mysterious black Rabbits three times today, whereas we had only seen one the day before. I realized the situation was far more dire than I had expected.

“If Roqué really has gone outside the village, he’s gotta be in grave danger.”

“Chirp.”

“Growl growl!”

“You’re right, we’ve gotta find him, fast.”

Rick and Bear Bear beckoned me to hurry up. I didn’t blame them for being worried; Roqué and I *were* fishing buddies, after all. We bulldozed our way through the onslaught of monsters and made it to the fishing spot, but unfortunately, there was no sign of Roqué. Our trip hadn’t been in vain, though.

“...!”

“What is it, Sakura?”

Sakura had picked something off the ground. It appeared to be a small, red, fish-shaped object.

“Is that a fishing lure?”

Why did it look oddly familiar...? That’s right, it belonged to Roqué! So he *had* come here!

“Quick, everyone! Comb the area!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

We split up and searched the fishing spot, hoping to find additional clues. Shortly, Olto discovered something between the rocks.

“Mm!”

“Hey, buddy. Find something?”

“Mm.”

Olto had found a hair accessory, although it didn’t seem like something Roqué would wear. Regardless, I stashed it in my inventory, just in case.

“Chirp!”

“You too, Rick?”

Rick presented me with a filthy-looking pouch he had dragged along. I opened it to find some herb seeds inside.

“Doesn’t seem like this will help us find Roqué either.”

We continued our search for a while longer but failed to find any more items. *What now?* I wondered, contemplating my next move.

“Logically speaking, we’re most likely to find our next lead by following the bear.”

First, the appearance of the giant bear, and now, the disappearance of Roqué, who had kept the bear a secret from the villagers for reasons unknown. From what we’d found so far, it was obvious that Roqué had returned to this fishing spot.

“That means there’s a high probability that he headed upstream where the bear was first sighted.”

Hmm, what should I do? Running into the bear would surely mean instant death for all of us. Even if we managed to avoid the creature, a strong mob was more than enough to wipe us out. I was pretty sure that Roqué’s disappearance was related to the event, though...

“Guess we’ve got no other choice. Let’s go, guys. We’ll do our best to avoid fighting and try to determine Roqué’s whereabouts. Worst-case scenario, even if we end up respawning, we’ll at least be able to alert other people and have them pick up where we left off.”

Having made up my mind, we began traveling farther upriver.

“Growl.”

“...!”

The five of us climbed over the riverside’s ledges, panting with the exertion. This was no easy feat, and it felt as though we were scaling a rock wall. Every now and then, a particularly large rock would slow us down. This posed no problem for Rick, who was able to scamper over it effortlessly. The rest of us relied on Olto’s earth magic, pulling ourselves up with the climbing holds he built. Olto and Sakura were

surprisingly quick on their feet and were up and over the rocks in no time. While Bear Bear wasn't particularly agile, they were faring pretty well thanks to their Climbing skill.

"Grrngh..."

I, on the other hand, was failing miserably. I supposed it couldn't be helped, given how low my Agility was. Sakura tied one of her vines around me like a safety harness, and Olto and Bear Bear assisted me from above. In the end, all three of them had to pull me up over the ledge. *What about Rick, you ask?* Rick was acting as our cheerleader. Standing atop Olto's head, he yelled out words of encouragement as my remaining three companions hoisted me up.

"Chirp chirp, chirp chirp!"

"Mm-mm, mm-mm!"

"Growl growl, growl growl!"

"...! ...!"

I could almost hear chants of *Heave ho! Heave ho!* in the background. Thanks to my monsters, I was able to make my way across the rock-strewn area along the river. The farther upstream we traveled, the more the monsters varied. Besides the Rabbits, we also encountered Little Bears and Attack Boars, as well as more powerful specimens shrouded in black mist. We continued on our way, fighting off the creatures and fleeing whenever possible.

After traveling along the river for thirty minutes or so, the landscape began to change, as rocky ledges gave way to smooth, graveled mountain roads and dense forests.

"Looks like we've entered a clearing."

Gradually, the trees thinned out, and we found ourselves in a vast open space, the numerous rocks replaced with pebbled pavement. Clearly, this had to mean something.

"Guys, I think we oughta comb this area... Huh?"

A search proved to be unnecessary—I had spotted something that I couldn't possibly miss. Off to the side of the square was a largish boulder. There was no mistaking what was at its base: a cave.

"Whoa! An actual cave!"

The craggy surface, coupled with clumps of moss, granted it an incredibly realistic air. Now, *this* was what you called a fantasy world! *Adventure awaits us, my friends!* Was it safe to enter, though? I couldn't help imagining swarms of dangerous monsters and traps lurking in the darkness. Now that I thought about it, it didn't seem like such a good idea to just charge in headlong...

"Growl."

"Hm? What's up, buddy?" I asked, snapping out of my reverie and accepting the object Bear Bear was offering up to me.

"Looks like a bamboo basket."

Upon closer inspection, I realized that it was a creel for holding fish. It looked exactly like the one Roqué had.

“Where’d you find this?”

“Growl!”

Bear Bear pointed to some rocks stationed by the entrance of the cave. Granted, they weren’t actually pointing, given that their teddy bear paws lacked fingers, but I could still guess the approximate location.

“You found it between those rocks, huh?”

“Growl!” Bear Bear nodded.

“That’s right near the entrance... Does that mean Roqué came here?”

I peered inside the cave tentatively, swallowing the lump in my throat. A white object lay on the ground a few meters away.

“What could that be?” I muttered as I bent down to pick it up. The object turned out to be a white handkerchief embroidered with flowers—something that likely belonged to a woman.

“...!”

As I was examining the handkerchief, I noticed Sakura standing next to me, trying to grab my attention.

“Hey, Sakura. What is it?”

“...!”

It was now Sakura’s turn to make a discovery. She tugged at my hand, desperately trying to communicate something. I followed her, and she eventually stopped at the foot of a tree on the edge of the square, pointing above us. A beige object resembling a straw hat appeared to be caught on one of its branches.

“Think you can get it down for us, Rick?”

“Chirp!”

Rick saluted in reply and shinnied up the tree. Within mere moments, he had successfully retrieved the hat and was back on the ground.

“Is that Roqué’s? Actually, no. I remember his hat had a wider brim.”

The brim of this hat was slightly narrower. I then recalled the receptionist mentioning that two other children had gone missing with Roqué. Perhaps this hat belonged to one of them. Considering how we kept stumbling upon their belongings...

“No doubt they entered this cave.”

I was sure of it, given how the event was progressing so far.

“That settles it then. We’ve gotta go inside. Ready, gu—”

“GRAAAWWRRR!”

“Huh?! What the...? Don’t tell me that was the bear...?”

I had just gathered everyone, ready to set foot inside the cave,

when a low, deep growl echoed from within. Shooting a quick glance in the direction of the sound, I spotted a massive black shadow approaching us: a bear. The beast possessed none of the adorable fluffiness that Bear Bear or Little Bears had. Its eyes flashed with fury as saliva sprayed from its mouth, lips drawn back in a vicious snarl. Even from afar, it was obvious that it wasn't a creature to be messed with. The terrifying behemoth charged at us at full speed, showing no signs of stopping. I felt lightheaded as the blood drained from my face.

"L-Let's get outta here!" I yelled, pulling myself together with considerable effort. The cave walls seemed to shake with the monster's roars.

"Nope, no way we're going in *there*! Back the way we came, guys! Head downstream!"

We fled the clearing, running for our lives, as the beast's cries continued to rend the air.

"Eek! It's coming after us!"

"Mmm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...!"

"GRAAAWWWRR!"

"Run, and don't you *dare* slow down!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl growl!"

"...!"

Despite running as fast as our legs could carry us, the bear remained hot on our tails. I yelped, cowering as it unleashed another hair-raising bellow. Taking my chances, I quickly turned back to appraise the enormous creature and learned that it was called a Guardian Bear. The sounds of its earsplitting roars and gnashing teeth echoed behind us, filling me with a deep dread—despite this being a game. If this were to happen to me in real life, I would most likely break out in goose pimples. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if I ended up soiling my pants as well; that was how terrifying the frenzied bear was. *This is exactly the stuff nightmares are made of!*

"Roaaarr!"

I heard an especially loud clack as its teeth gnashed together once more. The bear was practically breathing down our necks.

"Shit, it's gonna catch up to us any second now!"

"Mmm!"

"C'mon, there's gotta be *something* we can do!"

Olto's earth magic was useless in battle, and I doubted Rick would be able to do anything either. Bear Bear likely wouldn't stand a

chance against the beast. That left us with...

“Sakura! Think you can do something?”

“...?”

“Graawr!”

“I know, how about using your tree magic to— Eep!”

A sharp whistle sounded as something zipped through the air. The next instant, I felt a wooden piece of shrapnel the size of my arm whiz past, missing me by mere inches. No doubt I would have been seriously injured if it had hit me. Evidently, the bear had stripped the bark from a tree with its claws and sent it flying.

“Holy crap, we’re gonna die!”

“...!”

“Grarr?”

Crash!

What was that? I glanced behind us, stunned by the sudden racket. To my surprise, the bear had tripped and smashed into a tree, and was temporarily immobilized.

“...!”

Sakura struck a victory pose, a triumphant look on her face.

“Did you use your tree magic?”

“...!”

I took a good, hard look at the spot where the Guardian Bear had stumbled and spotted a rope stretched between two trees. Sakura had apparently fashioned a makeshift trap out of vines using her tree magic. Running at top speed, the bear had been unable to slow down in time and had gotten its front paws caught on the rope, knocking it off-balance. The creature seemed relatively unscathed, but that didn’t matter—those few seconds were all we needed to make a hasty getaway.

“Good job, Sakura!”

“...♪”

Thanks to Sakura’s diversion, we managed to escape into a rocky area. It would likely be harder for the bear to run here than in the forest, given its size. My hunch proved to be correct, as the creature slowed down considerably, hindered by the numerous rocks in its path.

Steeling myself, I jumped off the boulder that I had struggled to climb on the way here.

“Hiyah! Guh!” I wheezed, ignoring the stitch in my side; we couldn’t afford to waste time climbing down the rocks. Although I felt a tingling sensation in my feet upon landing, the pain was barely noticeable. Thank goodness this was just a game. The tiny bit of damage I had sustained was nothing some medicine or potions couldn’t fix. All in all, it looked like I had managed to avoid the worst-

case scenario of being paralyzed from the fall.

“Graaawwwrrr!”

Sadly, we hadn’t been able to throw the Guardian Bear off our trail completely, and its roar sounded far too close for comfort.

“That bastard won’t give up, huh? Sorry, guys, no time to relax!”

“Mmm!”

“Growl!”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

Rick, being the shrewd little rascal he was, had fastened himself to Olto’s head. He gripped his hair tightly, desperate not to be thrown off, as though he were a cop clinging to the roof of a car in a high-speed chase.

“Sakura! Think you can do that trick with your vines again?”

“...” She shook her head apologetically, crossing her arms in an X in front of her. *Guess that means no.* Come to think of it, there were only rocks here, not a single vine in sight.

The enormous beast uttered another cry as it jumped off the rocks, landing hard on the ground. Even from a distance, we could feel the force of its impact, but it appeared unhurt. Within seconds, it was in full pursuit of us again.

“Damn it! Not gonna let us catch a break, are you?!”

The height I had braved seemed to pose no problem for the Guardian Bear: it might as well have jumped off a trampoline. Although I had no idea how large its territory was, I was sure we’d be safe once we reached Roqué’s fishing spot, seeing how it hadn’t followed Marca’s party that far. We were totally screwed if it turned out that it’d simply given up the chase halfway the last time, though. However, that was the only sliver of hope we had, whether we liked it or not.

“Roaaarrr!”

The beast was dangerously close: it could catch up to us any moment now. Other than Sakura’s tree magic, what else could we use to stall the bear? Without slowing my pace, I tried my best to remember what I had in my inventory. I couldn’t think of anything that might be useful in stalling the bear, though. All I had were potions and ingredients for various concoctions—the rest were all food items.

“Hang on. Maybe we can distract it with food.”

It was worth trying; I had absolutely nothing to lose.

“Take that!”

I fished out a hunk of rabbit meat from my inventory and threw it at the bear. *Doesn’t that raw meat look delicious? How’s that for a treat, eh?*

“Grawwrr!”

“You don’t want meat? How about this, then?!” I yelled, tossing it a jar of honey. *Bears love honey, right?* Even a fearsome creature like it surely couldn’t resist the temptation of its favorite food! As if to demonstrate my point, Bear Bear stared longingly at the honey in my hand. *Have some self-restraint, mate! Now’s not the time!* However, the beast didn’t so much as glance at the jar on the ground. I’d been positive that once it saw the honey, it would skid to a halt and start lapping at it, though! *Damn it! And you call yourself a bear?!*

“Fine, take this! ...No? Maybe this one, then? ...Ugh, you’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Recalling all those wildlife documentaries about bears catching salmon, I tossed the creature a piece of small dried fish next, which was the closest thing I could find. As luck would have it, the bear completely ignored my offering. The acorn cookies that followed proved equally useless. Maybe it was because we looked more delicious? Perhaps trying to distract it with food had been a stupid idea. Even if we threw in the towel and focused all our efforts on running, though, the bear would catch up to us in less than a minute. Seeing no better alternative, I decided to chuck all my items at it and hope for the best. I began tossing out one food item after another, not even bothering to check what it was. *So this must be how Doraemon feels in a fix!* The next instant...

“Huh? For real?”

Amidst my throwing frenzy, the bear suddenly strayed off course, darting to a spot where some fruit lay on the ground. Evidently, it was a fan of purple persimmons and green peaches. That information would most likely come in handy during battle. All right, now was our chance to escape! Safety was almost within reach! I armed myself with another purple persimmon just in case, running as fast as humanly possible with my monsters. By now, I was utterly spent, and my breath came in ragged gasps.

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

Sensing I was nearing my limits, Olto and Sakura grasped my hands firmly and dragged me along. *Bless these two! As for you, Rick, get off my head! Your tail’s tickling me!*

“We...should be...safe...now...” I wheezed, my legs giving out upon arriving back at the fishing spot. I couldn’t possibly move another inch.

“Aargh... Water...”

I chugged a bottle of water that I had retrieved from my inventory and glanced behind me. The bear was nowhere to be seen. Just to be safe, I used my Presence Detection skill to survey the area, but was

unable to detect anything out of the ordinary. It looked like we'd succeeded in getting away.

"Th-Thank goodness..."

"Mm."

"Growl."

"Chirp."

"...♪"

Olto and Bear Bear sank to the ground, while Rick and Sakura looked equally relieved. They must have been at their limits too. Rick seemed more chipper than the rest of us, though, thanks to all those free rides he had gotten.

"...Let's head back to the village, shall we?"

"Mm..."

Even though we were no longer being pursued, I couldn't help quickening my pace. Once we had made it back safely, we headed straight to the village square, intent on informing the others about what we'd learned.

"Did you just get back, Silver-Haired?" Kokuten greeted me at the entrance of the square.

"Oh, hey there, Kokuten," I replied.

"I heard that you went looking for the missing children... From the looks of it, I'm guessing you haven't found them yet?"

"Nope, no such luck. I have a rough idea of where they might be, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Thing is, we ran into that bear."

I explained how we'd discovered the cave by following the missing children's trail, as well as how the Guardian Bear had started chasing us when we were debating whether to enter it, prompting us to flee for our lives. I made sure not to leave out any details, including the exact location of the cave. There was no point in keeping that information to myself, as this was hardly something I could deal with on my own. It was better to share what I knew and enlist the help of others.

"Sounds like you had a rough time."

"No kidding. I thought we were gonna die. Right, guys?"

"Mmm."

"Chirp."

"Growl."

"...♪"

Each of my monsters nodded vigorously in agreement. Bear Bear raised their paws, eyes narrowed in a menacing glare as they began chasing Rick. In turn, Rick made an exaggerated display of shock, squealing as he ran.

“Growl growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

It looked like they were reenacting our encounter with the Guardian Bear, although I doubted Kokuten understood what they were trying to convey.



“You reckon that’s where the bear has set up its den?” Kokuten mused.

“Hmm... Can’t say for sure.”

“Either way, it won’t be easy to enter the cave if the bear’s there...”

“Exactly. That’s why we hurried back to the village—so we could ask your opinion. Think you can do something about the Guardian Bear?”

“As of now, it’s highly unlikely.”

I was sure we could enter the cave, if only we had some way of dealing with the bear. Unfortunately, it seemed like we still had a ways to go.

“By the way, do you remember what time the bear attacked you?”

“Huh? You wanna know the time?”

“Yes.”

“Gimme a sec. I’ll check my logs.”

According to my gaming logs, we had stumbled upon the cave at 10:05. After twenty minutes of searching the area, we found the straw hat caught on a tree branch. Another five minutes had passed before we ran into the bear and started fleeing. Upon learning all that, Kokuten furrowed his brow, sunk in thought.

“What’s up?” I nudged him.

“Nothing, just... Assuming that the bear lives in that cave, I was wondering why it wasn’t there from the beginning.”

“Well, bears need to hunt for food and patrol their territory, don’t they? *If* it’s anything like the bears in real life, that is.”

“True, but there are other possibilities, don’t you think?”

“Like?”

“Perhaps it was lured out of its cave. It might have been in the middle of a battle or something.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

That was entirely plausible. So the bear had left the cave to deal with some trespassers, and I had just happened to find its den while it was away.

“As a matter of fact, Siegfried and a group of volunteers fought the Guardian Bear around the same time you found the cave. The time you were attacked by the bear also coincides with the time Siegfried’s group faced a party wipe.”

Finding the cave when we did had been a matter of sheer good luck. If we had arrived a few minutes earlier, the bear would’ve killed us all.

“Seems highly likely that the cave has something to do with the event, though. I would love to explore it,” Kokuten continued.

“Not to mention we gotta find Roqué too.”

“Absolutely. If possible, I’d like to hear what other people think and get more information about the bear.”

More info, eh...? Unfortunately for us, the one person who was bound to know something was currently missing. It would’ve been great if I’d been able to talk to Roqué’s family, but alas, that wasn’t an option either. For now, it seemed like my best course of action would be to interview the other villagers. Maybe Cayenne or the old woman at the general store could shed some light on the matter. *Wait a minute.* Of course—there *was* one person who could most likely give us a clue.

“If I’m not mistaken, the receptionist at the guild seemed to know something,” I informed Kokuten.

“That so? Very well, I’ll go have a word with her. Think you could talk to the villagers and do some digging around, Silver-Haired? You *are* on friendlier terms with them than the rest of us.”

“Sure thing.”

I figured I should start with Cayenne, seeing as I was staying at his place. To my disappointment, however, I found the house empty. Now that I recalled, he did tell me he ate out for lunch.

“I know.”

If Cayenne wasn’t available, then the other villagers would have to do. Since Aval’s house—the dairy farmer who had given me cheese—was the closest, I decided to visit him first. The chances of him having warmed to me already were pretty slim, but at the very least, he’d probably be willing to share what he knew if I brought up Roqué’s name.

“Hello?” I called out after knocking on his door.

“Just a minute. Hang on, you look familiar... You’re Yuto, right?” Aval greeted me after a moment’s hesitation. *Hey, he actually remembered my name.* Considering how small this village was, outsiders like us undoubtedly stuck out a mile.

“Yep, that’s me. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you something. Are you free now?”

“No problem. I can spare some time. Why don’t you come on in? You too, little friends.”

“Thank you. If I may.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Chirp.”

“...♪”

“Growl.”

Well, that was easy enough. Had I unwittingly done something to boost my favorability score? That wasn’t the only thing that surprised me: as soon as I entered Aval’s house, I spotted a familiar face.

“Cayenne? Didn’t expect to bump into you here.”

“Hm? That you, Yuto?”

Cayenne wasn’t the only guest present. Several old folks were seated around the table, chatting amongst themselves. Between their age and lack of stamina, they had been unable to join the missing children’s search party. Still, they couldn’t bear to just sit at home waiting for the news, and had gathered at Aval’s house.

“What brings you here, my boy?” Cayenne gave me an inquiring look.

“Apparently, he wants to ask us something,” Aval chipped in.

“That’s right. You see, we encountered a giant bear upriver. Would you happen to know anything about it?”

“I take it you’ve met our guardian beast, then?”

Guardian beast? Well, that certainly explained its name. I recounted to the group of elders my tale about how we’d been attacked by the bear while looking for the missing children, which promptly caused a stir.

“What?! Are you saying the guardian beast *attacked* you?”

“Huh? Um, yeah. Quite a few players have respawned already.”

“Impossible,” Cayenne muttered.

“What do you mean?” I asked, perplexed. The old folks exchanged knowing looks with each other before nodding in unspoken agreement.

“Well... You travelers *have* been a help to the village, especially you, Yuto. I suppose it can’t hurt to tell you.”

Cayenne then proceeded to give me a fascinating overview of the village’s history, which most likely had to do with the event. *What a stroke of luck!* I hadn’t been expecting to get a lead here. The story went something like this: a long time ago, the Village of Alf had nearly been wiped out by a fearsome archdemon. Fortunately, the fiend was defeated by an adventurer and sealed away in a secret location. Trapping it in place was a pair of sacred trees that two guardian beasts stood watch over.

“One of the beasts is a Guardian Bear, the other a Guardian Boar. I can assure you they’re not bloodthirsty creatures that go around attacking people, though—far from it. If anything, they’re the sort of monsters that help lost villagers find their way home. Literally speaking, they’re the tutelary deities of this village,” Cayenne added, concluding his tale. What was going on then? Were the beasts attacking people who weren’t from this village? Or could that mysterious black mist be driving them crazy?

“...Maybe something’s happened to the sacred trees,” Aval murmured.

“What do you mean, Aval?” Cayenne replied.

“Cacal told me he sometimes finds rabid monsters caught in his traps. Well, what if the guardian beasts...?”

“Are you suggesting the demon’s seal is breaking?”

“It’s possible.”

“Hmm...”

According to lore, the archdemon possessed the ability to control monsters and make them go berserk. So this demon was to be the final boss of this event. It looked like we’d found our real target.

“I’d like to rescue Roqué and his friends, but the guardian beast is in our way. Would it be bad if we defeated it?” I asked.

“Those beasts are as old as the village, and we pretty much consider them family at this point. It would pain us to see them hurt. Besides, there’s no telling what would happen to the sacred trees if you defeated their protectors.”

Damn, talk about a stroke of luck! Thank goodness the Guardian Bear was a massive damage sponge. If it had been a weaker target, one of the players might have vanquished it by now. That meant we’d have to find a way to rescue the missing kids without defeating the bear. The only viable option I could think of at the moment was to have a few players distract the guardian beast while we went into the cave. I’d have to discuss things with Kokuten once I got back.

“Is it okay if I share this information with the others? That way, we’ll be able to avoid unnecessary conflict with the guardian beasts.”

“No problem. Be my guest.”

“Thanks for all your help.”

Having learned all we could, we bid the old folks farewell and left Aval’s house.

“Let’s see, what else can I do before we head back...? Buy some fruit maybe?”

Based on our previous encounter, I figured fruits might serve as a useful distraction. To my dismay, however, the grocer was already sold out. Apparently, we weren’t the only ones keen on obtaining rare and unusual fruit.

“Hmm, where else can I go...? I know, how about the old lady’s shop?”

She seemed to have a slightly different selection of items every time I visited; perhaps she’d have fruits as well. Even if she didn’t, there might be something else I could use as a substitute. I’d be able to talk to her too, as it wasn’t like I had any other leads. Unfortunately, I had no such luck at the general store. The old woman was just as clueless as I was about what the guardian beasts liked, and there were no fruits either.

The only positive outcome of my trip was the recently stocked premium fertilizer that I’d managed to buy. It was a valuable item,

and I was thrilled with my purchase. While I wasn't likely to have any use for it during my stay here, I was looking forward to testing it out on my farm once the event was over.

"Shame we didn't get any fruits, but oh well. Time to go find the others."

Better hurry up and inform everyone about the Guardian Bear before anyone else dies unnecessarily.

When I returned, the central figures of this server had already assembled in the square. Kokuten had apparently called a meeting while we were gone. *Quick as always, I see.*

"Kokuten! Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not at all. Gathering information is important. So, did you learn anything?"

"I sure did!"

I began telling the group what I'd learned from Cayenne and Aval. Although I wasn't particularly gifted at storytelling, everyone nevertheless seemed mesmerized by my tale. The words "archdemon" and "guardian deity" had probably excited them in particular. *Typical gamers.*

"Never knew such lore existed," Siegfried marveled once I'd finished my report.

"Fascinating stuff," Marca remarked.

"Sounds pretty important," Kokuten agreed. The group was also stunned to learn that we weren't supposed to defeat the guardian beasts. After all, it meant that our previous efforts had been for nothing. It was probably a particularly vexing update for these three, who had already attempted to fight the bear with only a respawn to show for it.

"So killing the bear is off-limits. Got it," Kokuten murmured.

"Not that we have any clue how to defeat it yet. Siegfried's group was the last to face the beast. We took a break from fighting after that to discuss our strategy. No one's gone since then."

Apparently, the expedition party had taken a hiatus to compile a list of the Guardian Bear's attack patterns, which were now becoming more obvious.

"Never mind that, though—we have to figure out how we're going to rescue those children. Roqué, was it? You say there's a pretty good chance he's in that cave?" Siegfried asked.

"Nothing's certain, but yeah," I replied.

"Either way, I think we ought to search it. Sounds sus," Marca remarked. The group then began discussing their next move. Like me, they eventually concluded that our only option was to split into two groups: one to lure the Guardian Bear away and fight it, and the other to search the cave. In my opinion, Kokuten and Marca's parties were

best suited for the latter task. I figured it was only right to dispatch our strongest team if we wanted to search the cave properly, as there was no knowing what kind of dangers lay within. However, the others seemed to think otherwise, saying I ought to go as I was the one who had discovered the cave. Their reasoning was that since I was the only person who had ever met Roqué, it was possible that my presence was required for the event to progress. Put in that way, it was hard to argue with them.

“If it’s just us, though, we’ll most likely die,” I admitted.

“We’ll need another party to back you up then,” Siegfried replied.

“Ooh, pick me, pick me! I’ll go with you!” Marca exclaimed, waving frantically at Kokuten and Siegfried. “I’ll protect you, Silver-Haired! Don’t you worry!”

Marca shot me an innocent look, as if to suggest that she was volunteering purely out of the kindness of her heart. Did she not realize that made her seem all the more suspicious?

“What’s your motive?” I eyed her warily.

“Motive? Don’t be silly. I just want to help you, that’s all!”

As nice as that sounded, she obviously had a hidden agenda. I had only to follow her gaze to see what her real intentions were.

“Right, if you come with us, you’ll be able to hound Bear Bear the whole time.”

Marca gulped nervously.

“Let me guess, you’ll ‘just so happen’ to snap some pics of Bear Bear under the pretext of screenshotting our route and any traps we encounter?”

“Ah ha...”

“And if you’re lucky, you might even get a chance to give Bear Bear a hug while pretending to protect them?”

“Eh heh heh...”

“...Marca?”

“Can you blame me, though?!”

“You’re being super obvious.”

“Come *onnnn*, I promise not to neglect my bodyguard duties!” she cried, throwing herself at me. Thanks to the harassment block, I was spared physical contact, although that didn’t change the fact that she was a nuisance.

“Gah, get away from me!”

“Pleeease, Silver-Haired! Be a sport!”

Damn it, she’s stubborn. What are you, a zombie?!

“Now, now. Given how capable Marca’s party is, I don’t think it’s such a bad idea,” Siegfried said consolingly, stepping between us. *Oh, don’t get me wrong.* It wasn’t that I was against it—I just couldn’t help being irritated.

“Are you okay with this, Kokuten?” I asked.

I hated saying this, but something was definitely going to happen in the cave. It could very well be the perfect opportunity for players to raise their individual rank and rack up points, not to mention those who weren't participating in the cave search were automatically relegated to detaining the Guardian Bear. Kokuten and Siegfried had already fought the bear and died once; if they respawned again, they'd lose even more event points. Kokuten didn't appear to be bothered in the slightest, though.

“I don't mind. I know I can rely on Marca's party. We'll gladly take on the task of distracting the bear. If we have several more parties helping us, we can take turns fighting.”

“I'll participate too,” Siegfried chimed in. “I'm positive my beloved horse and I will make excellent decoys.”

“You two sure about this? It's a risky job, and there's a pretty good chance you'll both end up respawning again.”

“No matter. The villagers need us!” Siegfried cried, flashing a reassuring smile.

“Our party's been discussing how we'd like to take on that bear again. We may have been steamrolled last time, but we won't be crushed so easily again,” Kokuten declared, eyes glinting with determination. Fighting the Guardian Bear seemed to have its perks too: since it was such a powerful opponent, players could gain more XP than usual.

“Well, I won't stop you guys if that's what you want...” I sighed, before remembering something. “That reminds me. Here, take this with you.”

I handed them the few fruits I had left. While they had come in handy during our escape, I wasn't sure if they would be of any help during battle. Still, it was worth trying.

“Are these fruits?”

“Do they grant you special buffs or something?”

“Not exactly.”

I told them how we'd used fruits as a distraction while escaping from the Guardian Bear. *I see*, Kokuten nodded, accepting my offering. Given that the bear clearly surpassed the players' levels, he'd suspected that the devs might be throwing us a lifeline with this. Although he offered to pay for the fruits, I declined. *I* was the one who'd been tasked with finding Roqué in the first place, which they had so kindly agreed to help with. Peaches and persimmons hardly seemed like fair compensation. That reminded me: there was another item in my inventory that could prove useful.

“By the way, think this will help?”

“That looks, um, *interesting*... Is that pork and vegetable miso

soup...? Wow, check out those effects!”

“Indeed. I’ve never seen a dish with these many buffs before.”

Even Kokuten and Siegfried seemed impressed by my soup. I was glad to learn that the extra time I’d spent on preparation and additional ingredients had panned out. I hadn’t expected Siegfried to be so surprised, though. *Reckon it’s because I used ingredients I obtained in this event.* In a sense, these were spanking new discoveries, rather than items you could find on the typical front lines.

“I have five servings at the moment.”

“That’s not going to be enough for everyone...” Siegfried murmured, eyes downcast.

“Sounds like a must if we’re fighting the Guardian Bear, though. To be honest, I’d love to eat it, regardless of whether it has any buffs,” Kokuten confessed.

“Why’s that?”

“I’m a typical bachelor, so...the only time I get to eat miso soup is at beef bowl restaurants. You have no idea how much I’ve been craving some good miso soup.”

Meanwhile, several players had formed a wide circle around us. The smell of my soup had apparently enticed them. It was probably only Kokuten and Siegfried’s celebrity status that kept them from coming any nearer. However, one of the onlookers finally took a few steps forward, seemingly unable to contain himself any longer.

“Excuse me. Where can I buy that?” he asked.

“I didn’t buy it, I made it myself. I’ve also run out of ingredients,” I answered. That wasn’t entirely true, but I had to save some for myself, didn’t I? The guy drooped his shoulders, looking dejected. The remaining onlookers also sighed in disappointment.

“That’s too bad.”

“Aw, what a shame! It smells really good.”

Some players refused to give up, though. Were they that desperate for miso soup?

“If I bring you the ingredients, will you make it for us? I’ll pay you too, obviously!” one of them begged.

“Huh? Uh, sure, I guess.”

“Really?”

I hesitated for a split second. By sharing the necessary ingredients, I was pretty much revealing the recipe. That being said, I hadn’t intended to keep it a secret anyway. I’d simply made it the same way I would miso soup in real life—anyone could’ve come up with the recipe. There was nothing to worry about. I told the onlookers that I needed vegetables, Attack Boar meat, miso, and small fish. If I was lucky, they might even take it upon themselves to make the soup. Once I’d disclosed the ingredients I needed, the players began

rummaging around in their inventories.

“I have meat, but that’s about it.”

“Where can we get fish?”

“I’ve got a few vegetables.”

Most people had vegetables and meat. One of the players who possessed Fishing skills presented us with some fish that they had caught in the lake in the Town of Beginnings. By some miracle, we were able to find someone who had miso too. According to them, you could buy miso by befriending an NPC brewer in Zone Three. That was good to know. None of the players had the full set of ingredients, though. Unless they possessed Cooking skills, there was no reason for them to hold on to foodstuff; even if they did, they would likely use them for their own meals. Undeterred, one of the players stepped in as leader, asking the crowd for cooperation.

“If we all pitch in, we’ll most likely have all the ingredients we need.”

“You’re right! Why didn’t we think of that?”

“How’s that, Silver-Haired?!”

“Uh, thanks. Yep, that’s everything.”

I couldn’t back out now, not after offering to make soup for them. Still, I hadn’t expected to receive this mountain of ingredients...

“I can’t manage this amount on my own. Any cooks willing to help me?” I asked the crowd for volunteers. A few people raised their hands tentatively, seeming unsure.

“Um, sure you want us to help?”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I be? If anything, I’d be thrilled.”

“Your recipe won’t be a secret anymore if we help you.”

“Oh, *that’s* what you’re worried about? Honestly, I couldn’t care less. It’s not a complicated recipe anyway. If it bothers you that much, how about I give you the recipe in exchange for helping me?”

It would take me ages to prepare all these ingredients on my own. I desperately needed some help.

“W-Wow, you’re the GOAT, Silver-Haired.”

“Celebrities sure are generous. You’re awesome, dude.”

“Come on, let’s take him up on his offer.”

I then heard the others discussing something, though I couldn’t quite catch everything they said. Had I committed a faux pas? Was it common practice to ask for money instead? To my relief, however, they soon turned to me and agreed to help. *Phew*. It looked like things would work out after all.

What ensued was a massive cookout. Using the cooking table and kitchen tools that the other players owned, we began making miso soup. We ended up making so much that my skill level went up again, and with players with Cooking skills even higher than mine in our

group, the end product had a higher rating and better effects than before.

Name: Pork and Vegetable Miso Soup

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 8★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 25%. Increases auto-recovery rate of HP for two hours. Boosts Endurance and Sanity by 3 for two hours.

After talking with the players who had shared their ingredients with me, we agreed not to get any money involved. I couldn't be bothered calculating the cost of each item, and besides, we'd all gained something from this exchange. I could probably make a hefty profit if I decided to sell my soup, but no matter.

"Looks like we have some leftovers... Mind if I give this to Kokuten's group?"

I was keen on having Kokuten and Siegfried try my soup too, seeing as they had volunteered to distract the Guardian Bear. As the others had no objections, I set aside a few bowls for them. That was the last of our soup; despite using a giant pot, we were only able to make forty servings. While I felt bad for the people who had missed out, there was nothing I could do about it. Even my companions were staring wistfully at the players tucking into their meals.

"Come to think of it, I haven't fed you guys yet today, have I?"

"Mmm..."

"Here, eat this. You too, Rick and Bear Bear."

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl!"

After accepting their food, Bear Bear and Rick joined Olto and trotted over to the group eating their soup. It seemed like they wanted in on the fun too. Of course, no one could resist my monsters' cuteness, and the crowd instantly parted and made space for them, even arguing about who'd get to sit next to whom. Unbothered, my companions showed off their meals to the players and began munching happily, finally settling the crowd down. The whole scene reminded me of a camp cookout. My monsters seemed overjoyed at the festivities, and the rare chance to dine with so many people. Even Sakura, who didn't require any sustenance, was beaming. Although cooking had been pretty labor-intensive, seeing my companions' smiles made it all worthwhile.

"Mmm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...♪"

Better recharge your batteries while you can, guys. Y'all are going to suffer in the cave after this.

"Man, I'm stuffed!"

"That was delicious. Thank you so much!"

"I had fun!"

The players who had finished eating thanked me in turn, grinning with satisfaction. We were in a game, but people apparently still yearned for the taste of home, as evidenced by the smiles on their faces. I could hear countless players discussing how to recreate my recipe.

"Starting tomorrow, I'm making miso soup!"

"For real? Save some for me too, will ya? I'm happy to pay extra for these buffs."

"I'm not talking about in-game! I mean in real life!"

"Fine by me."

"Huh? You mean...?"

"Will you make soup for me every morning...?"

"S-Sure, if that's okay with you..."

What the hell was this charade? Who said you could use my miso soup to kick-start a flirty conversation? *Hmph, you guys sure look happy together. Die, normies! Couples that get together in-game don't last long anyway!*

"..."

"..."

Thankfully, I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Eleven other people were glaring at the suddenly amorous couple, Kokuten included. As a fellow single working adult, I felt his pain. Together, we stared at the happy couple reproachfully. Regardless, they carried on with their sickly lovey-dovey behavior, fully oblivious.

"...Shall we discuss what to do next?" Kokuten sighed.

"Good idea..."

"Hey, Yuto. Your soup was fantastic," Siegfried complimented. Being the charming prince he was, he hadn't joined the green-eyed brotherhood, beaming at the couple instead. I was starting to feel like a petty human for not being able to celebrate others' happiness.

"What's the matter, you two?"

"Nothing."

"Ditto. Don't mind us, Siegfried."

Kokuten and I exchanged furtive glances. Judging by the deep sadness and despair in his eyes, he probably felt the same way as me. We nodded at each other, silently agreeing not to talk about this topic anymore. We hadn't even left yet, and I was already exhausted—mentally, that is. On the bright side, I felt closer to Kokuten than before, despite our bond being a rather sad one.

After some discussion, we agreed that the team fighting the Guardian Bear would leave first. Marca and I would depart ten minutes later. It all came down to whether our team would be able to finish searching the cave in the window that the decoy group gave us.

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 11

“Um, hey, bro? Are we really going in there?”

“We ain’t gonna get very far if we don’t leave the village. You said ya wanted to make it into the top ten, didn’t ya?”

“I-I mean, yeah, but... If we aren’t careful, we might end up losing points instead. Can’t we just stick with quests that can be completed inside the village?”

“Idiot! If you wanna win big, ya gotta be willin’ to take risks. Loads of players have been headin’ this way. Betcha anything there’s a great hunting ground in there!”

“Really? That’s all you’ve got to go on...? Shouldn’t we gather more information first...?”

“And who’re we s’posed to ask, huh? Those NPCs hardly give us any clues, and the other players refuse to share what they know!”

“I’m sure the NPCs wouldn’t be giving us the cold shoulder if you treated them with more respect.”

“What? You want *me* to suck up to those losers? Hmph, I ain’t gonna do any bootlickin’ in a game. No, siree.”

“I doubt we have much choice if we wanna get info.”

“Yo, birdbrain! Why do we gotta be nice to NPCs?! It’s *their* job to tell us what they know!”

“I don’t think that’s entirely true, but... Oh well, whatever. Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“Positive. I saw some players sneakin’ off in this direction talkin’ about some bear.”

“Bear?”

“Yep. Must be some bear that gives you a shit ton of points. You and I are gonna hunt it down!”

“...*Gulp*.”

“Yo, you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Grrrr...”

“What’s that growlin’ noise...? Holy, that bear is HUGE! AAAGH!”

“L-Let’s get outta— Eek!”

“GRAAWWWRRRR!”

Chapter Four: The Demon in the Trees

“Wow, Olto really is amazing!”

“Seriously. Never knew how useful earth magic was until now.”

“Maybe one of us should learn it too.”

“Good idea. We might not be able to tame a squirrel, but even just having earth magic is bound to be a game changer.”

Marca and her companions showered my monsters with praise on our way to the Guardian Bear’s lair. Seeing Olto create climbing holds for us to scale the boulders and Rick lassoing a tree branch had impressed them to no end. They seemed especially surprised by Sakura’s whip and tree magic, evidently not having realized that those skills could be used for noncombat purposes as well.

“Tree magic’s kind of a special case, though. Wonder if I can learn it by leveling up my Mage?”

“I hear it’s included in Elves and Halflings’ initial bonuses.”

“Rats, why didn’t I choose to be an Elf instead?!”

My companions climbed the rocks with gusto, keenly aware of all the attention and praise they were receiving.

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp chirp!”

Olto got carried away making unnecessary footholds, and Sakura dangled her whip as a safety rope even at a scalable height. Rick was also more enthusiastic than usual, assisting us wherever possible.

“Growl...”

Bear Bear alone looked glum, sulking as they kicked some pebbles. They probably felt left out because they hadn’t been able to contribute anything to the team.

“Uh-oh, someone’s in a bad mood.”

I was starting to feel a little sorry for them. Unable to stand it any longer, Marca bent down and whispered to me.

“Hey, Silver-Haired.”

“What’s up?”

“Don’t ‘what’s up’ me! Look at the state Bear Bear’s in! Do something, will you?!”

“Like what, though?” I sighed. It wasn’t as if we needed help with anything at the moment. Should I pretend to have trouble climbing

and ask Bear Bear to help me up? If they found out I had tricked them, though, they'd probably sulk even more.

"Just look at that behind...! That bootiful, wiggling butt! It's too cute for words! I think I might get a nosebleed! Like seriously, are they trying to kill me with their cuteness?!"

Oh, that's what you meant? As I was thinking about what to do next, Rick and Sakura ambled over to Bear Bear's side. Were they attempting to console them? Apparently, that wasn't the case; they seemed to have something else in mind.

"...♪"

"Chirp!"

"Growl?"

"...♪"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl growl!"

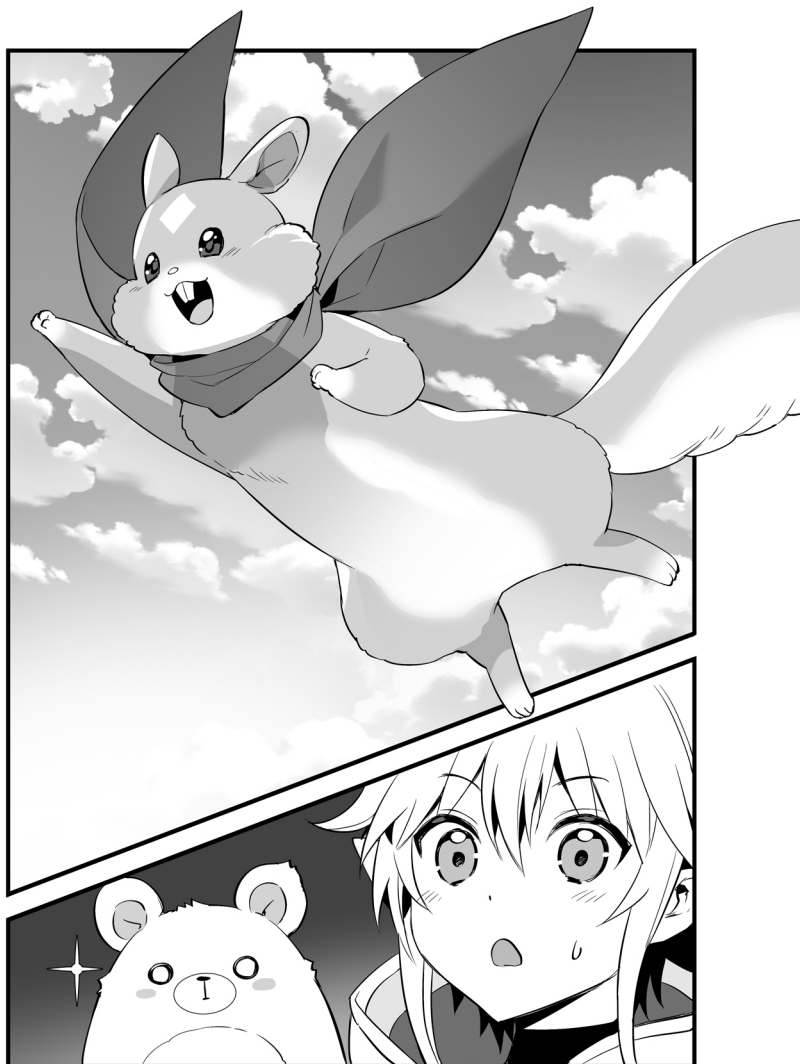
After appearing to discuss something, Rick grabbed Sakura's whip between his teeth before Bear Bear picked him up.

"What are they doing?" I wondered out loud. The next instant, Bear Bear got into windup position, Rick grasped firmly in their right paw.

"Growl growl!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Bear Bear then proceeded to throw Rick with all their might, as though he were a baseball.



“What the hell?” I gasped, completely dumbfounded. Rick soared through the air, arm raised and bandana flapping in the wind like Superman, before landing effortlessly on a boulder above. *Ah, I get it now.* They were trying to demonstrate an easy way of overcoming large rocks that even Rick had trouble climbing.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

Rick waved to Bear Bear down below, who waved back, looking immensely pleased. Although this particular instance seemed kind of forced and purely for Bear Bear’s benefit, I could definitely think of a few scenarios where this tactic might come in handy. We could probably use it to extend a rope to a tricky spot, like the opposite side of a river or cliff face.

That was pretty much the only hiccup we had, and we made it to the cave without any serious issues. Fighting was a breeze, with Marca and her gang instantly obliterating any monsters that crossed our path. My party didn’t partake in a single battle. If it weren’t for the fact that they were our bodyguards, I would’ve no doubt been considered a leech.

“Is that the cave?” Marca asked.

“Yup. Considering the Guardian Bear hasn’t attacked us yet, Kokuten and Siegfried must be doing a good job distracting it,” I replied.

“Better get on with our search before it returns then.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Pussyfooting outside the cave would get us nowhere. As nervous as I was, we had no choice but to enter it.

“We’re counting on you, Rick.”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick led the way with Marca’s party’s Thief as we charged into the cave.

“F-Feels legit.”

The entrance had been dimly lit, but after ten meters or so, we were plunged into near-darkness. On top of that, the air surrounding us was cold and damp, giving off a similar feel to the limestone cave I’d visited on vacation before. Come to think of it, this was my first time entering a dungeon or cave in-game. The only dungeon-like place I’d visited before was the underground tunnel where the Dryad’s altar was located, and that had been properly lit. Who knew the caves in-game would be this realistic...? I was glad I’d listened to Marca’s advice prior to our trip and brought a torch with me. As he was less fit for battle, I had tasked Olto with the job of holding the torch. After a mere few steps, however, he promptly handed it back to me.

“Mm-mm!”

“Huh? You want *me* to hold it?”

“Mm.”

I obliged, taking the torch from him. No sooner had I done that than Olto ran off towards the cave wall. *What’s up with him?* I wondered, observing him from afar. He then began striking the wall with his hoe—evidently, he had discovered a gathering node. Gathering items was an important part of any journey, after all. *No matter.* I could still use magic, even if I had a torch in one hand.

“No sign of any monsters, though,” I commented.

“Nada,” Marca agreed.

Although we’d already been walking for five minutes, we had yet to encounter any enemies.

“Where’d they go?”

“No traps either.”

“Not to mention it’s been a straight road so far.”

Marca’s teammates seemed equally taken aback. Gradually, the tense atmosphere relaxed, loosening everyone’s tongues. Marca’s eyes were glued to Bear Bear walking beside her. Rick, on the other hand, surprised me with his behavior, seeming to take his job seriously for a change. Instead of playing tag with the others or climbing on top of someone’s head, he ran a few paces ahead of us with the group Thief, sniffing around from time to time for signs of danger.

“Chirp!”

“That a mushroom?” the Thief asked.

“Chirp chirp.”

“Sharp nose you have. Kudos to you for finding such an obscure gathering node.”

“Chirp!”

“Leave the monsters and traps to us. You focus on gathering items, bud.”

“Chirp.”

Wow. They’re actually having a full-on conversation. The Thief’s diligence seemed to be rubbing off on Rick. We continued walking for about ten more minutes, the pair leading our way. In the end, we didn’t encounter a single monster, nor any traps or forks in the road. All we found were several gathering and mining nodes.

“Hey, there’s light up ahead,” Marca commented.

“Don’t tell me we’re at the exit already?” I asked in disbelief. Anticipating an event of some kind, I braced myself. Nothing happened, however, and we made it out of the cave safely.

“Looks like it was one straight road all the way through.”

The tunnel had led us to a lush green forest. We turned around, glancing back at the cave we’d just come from. The cave had been

nothing but a passage—this forest was where our journey actually began. Shit was about to get real.

“Guess we should be on our guard from here on out.”

“Get behind us, Silver-Haired. There’s no telling what sort of monsters might be in there.”

“G-Got it.”

Marca and her companions were once again on high alert, the carefree mood from the cave long gone. Each of them scanned the area, keeping their eyes peeled for any sudden movement. Getting into formation, we ventured inside the forest. Straightaway, several figures blocked our path.

“About time!”

“That’s four Rabbits, three Little Bears, and one Olive Treant!”

“Li’l excessive, dontcha think?”

“Think you can handle the Rabbits, Silver-Haired?” Marca requested.

“Roger!”

“We’ll deal with the Little Bears first!”

“I’ll keep the Treant at bay!” The Thief volunteered, staying behind while the rest of the group ran off to fight the Little Bears. Apparently, his job was to pull the enemy’s attention away from the team by generating hate. Meanwhile, my monsters and I got into a fierce battle with the Rabbits. Though we struggled a bit, thanks to half of them being enhanced by the mysterious miasma, Bear Bear’s claws and Sakura’s whip were able to finish them off in the end. Marca’s party was still battling the Little Bears, who seemed to have gotten an HP boost from the black mist surrounding them.

“All right, let’s go help with the Olive Treant!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

“...♪”

The Olive Treant resembled a tree with a human face. However, it lacked the sort of elderly charm that characters like Treebeard possessed and instead had hollows for eyes and a mouth, lending an eeriness to its appearance.

“Ooooooh!”

The tree let out a ghostly wail, looking and sounding like something out of a horror movie. Fortunately, it was rooted to the spot, and didn’t seem to have a very wide attack range. It lashed out at us in vain, its long vines stopping just shy of a few meters from where we stood. Taking advantage of the Treant’s immobility, the Thief provoked the creature from a distance, drawing its attention to himself. Seeing them fight gave me an idea.

“What would happen if I tried to tame it?”

It looked like I could select the Olive Treant as a target with my Tame skill, which meant it was a tameable monster. Even if I did manage to tame it, though, would it actually be able to travel with me?

“Whatcha brooding about, Silver-Haired?”

Marca and the rest of her group had joined us, having defeated the Little Bears.

“I was wondering... Any idea what would happen if I tame an Olive Treant?”

“Huh? This thing?”

“Yeah. Looks like I can tame it.”

“Hmm, haven’t a clue to be honest.”

No surprise there, given that she wasn’t a Tamer. My curiosity was starting to get the better of me, but I couldn’t just make a decision like that on my own, seeing as we were a team at the moment. Naturally, we wouldn’t be able to get any item drops if I succeeded at taming the Treant, so now didn’t seem like a good time to try. *Hang on, though.* What if I offered to give up some of the items I’d found on the way?

“Hey, Marca. Would you be willing to do me a favor?”

“Sure thing. Ask away.”

I asked her if she would let me tame the Olive Treant in exchange for some of my items, to which she agreed immediately. As it happened, her party had little use for Treants, finding Little Bear drops far more valuable.

“This Treant isn’t cute at all, though.” Marca sniffed, raising an eyebrow.

“Huh? Oh yeah, I suppose not,” I agreed.

“You sure you wanna tame it?”

“I don’t choose my monsters based on how cute they are, you know.”

“You don’t?! Really?”

Duh. Why the surprised Pikachu face? Aside from Rick, I hadn’t had any idea what Olto, Sakura, and Bear Bear looked like before they joined my party. Sure, there was no denying that all of my monsters were adorable, but it wasn’t as if I’d planned it that way.

“Ngh, I still don’t like it, though!” Marca whined.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“I prefer your monsters cute and cuddly!”

“Understandable, but...”

“Come on, stop making things difficult.” One of her party members intervened, trying to console her.

“It’s up to Silver-Haired to decide what monsters he wants to tame.”

“Shhh, calm down now.”

“Hey, let go of me!” Marca wailed as her companions dragged her away. *Uh, I am allowed to tame this Treant, right?*

“Don’t mind her. Her addiction to cute things sometimes makes her a little loopy,” one of the guys who had stayed behind said apologetically.

“Uh-huh...”

“Quick, now’s your chance to tame it before she comes back.”

With the help of the remaining party members, I attempted to tame the Treant.

“Ooooooh!”

“Hiyah! That good enough, Silver-Haired?”

“Yep, perfect! Hold Back! Aqua Ball!”

After dealing a certain amount of damage, I used Hold Back, reducing its HP to almost zero. Now, it was just a matter of taming it.

“Tame, tame, *tame*...! All right, it worked!”

“Oooh...”

I succeeded on the third try. Compared to unique specimens, regular monsters were fairly easy to tame.

“Okay, now what?”

Obviously, it wasn’t going to stay rooted to the spot...was it? I assumed that, like gnomes, it would undergo some kind of mutation once tamed. As it turned out, the Olive Treant began to glow and change shape, getting smaller and smaller by the second. Once the light had subsided, I was greeted with a totally unexpected sight.

“...Looks like a sapling.”

“That supposed to be a monster?” Marca frowned, popping back out of the blue. There seemed to be no mistake about it, though, as the Olive Treant was listed under my Tamed Monsters section on my status screen.

“Oh, but wait. I’m not getting a pop-up asking me to name it.”

Besides, I couldn’t find any stats for it other than the name “Olive Treant Sapling.” Not only that, I could even store the creature (?) in my inventory. My guess was that it was something between a plant and a monster. Did that mean it would eventually grow into an Olive Treant if I planted it somewhere?

“Well, that was unexpected,” I muttered.

“Never knew monsters like this existed,” Marca mused.

“Me neither.”

“Doesn’t seem like it can fight, huh?”

“Doubt it. Oh well, I’ll try planting it once the event’s over.”

As curious as I was, I’d just have to be patient until then. After several more battles, we set foot in a clearing. A collective sigh escaped us as we marveled at the sight before our eyes.

“Dang, what a view.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Chirp.”

“Growl.”

“...♪”

A sea of stark white flowers resembling chrysanthemums bloomed in full glory, tickling our nostrils with their sweet, heady scent. Amidst the flowers was a majestic tree, far larger than any natural creation you could find in real life. Even the zelkova tree at the shrine in my hometown, a well-known tourist attraction, was only half the size of this giant. I was certain not even the famed Japanese cedars of Yakushima, which I had only ever glimpsed on television, were this big. If it hadn't been for the Lakeside Sequoia in the Town of Beginnings, I would've no doubt been struck dumb by the sight. So far, this was the second-largest tree I'd encountered in-game. Could this be one of the sacred trees? Now wasn't the time to sit back and admire it, though. It was plain as day that something wasn't right here.

“Is it starting to wither?”

“There are cracks on the surface.”

“Looks like the roots are drying up too.”

Marca and her companions were right. The surface of the tree was dry and cracked in several places, its branches almost bare. Whatever leaves were still left had already dried up or browned around the edges. In contrast to the surrounding flora, which was as lush and verdant as it would be in the height of summer, this tree looked like it belonged in the dead of winter. My Appraisal skill displayed the following information: “Sacred Tree (Weakened).”

“Seems like the tree's in a weakened state... That why the guardian beast went berserk?” I muttered.

“Let's search the area,” Marca suggested.

“Good idea.”

We circled the tree, examining it at length, and discovered a sizable hollow at the back. Strangely enough, the very sight of it made me tingle with excitement.

“Wouldn't be surprised if fairies or a Poporo lived here!”

From the looks of it, the opening had to be at least one meter wide.

“You know, I reckon it's the perfect size for a kid,” I mused, peering inside. *Well, what do you know?* There really *was* a child.

“What the...?”

“Huh?”

The two of us stared at each other, slack-jawed. Clearly, the other person hadn't expected anyone else to show up. After silently locking

eyes for several more seconds, we both spoke at the same time.

“Roqué!”

“M-Mister!”

The child was none other than Roqué, who for some reason was holding his fishing pole like a spear.

“Thank goodness, you’re all right!”

Just as I’d thought—he *had* visited the cave. Now that I looked a little closer, I noticed that there were two other children besides him. One was a blond-haired, fair-skinned girl, the other a timid-looking, blue-haired boy with downturned eyes. They appeared to be the kids who had gone missing with Roqué.

“You guys okay? You’re not hurt, are you?” I frowned in concern.

“We’re okay,” Roqué replied. “How’d you get here, though, Mister?”

“Well, we came through the cave, obviously,” I answered. Roqué’s eyes widened in shock.

“For real? And the guardian beast didn’t attack you?”

“Were *you* attacked?”

“Yeah.”

Dang. It’s a miracle you made it out in one piece. Shortly, the girl and the boy joined our conversation, having deemed me a nonthreat after hearing Roqué talk to me.

“At first, the guardian beast wasn’t here. It seemed to have gone out hunting or something,” the girl began.

“Once we reached the sacred tree, though, the guardian beast returned and started chasing us. It looked furious.” The boy shuddered.

“That’s why we ran into this hollow.” Roqué finished.

“I see.”

Due to impeccable—or perhaps unfortunate—timing, they had made it this far in the Guardian Bear’s absence, only to run into it upon its return. Thankfully, the bear made no move to attack the sacred tree even in its frenzied state, which was how they had managed to survive until now.

“Speaking of, what made you come here in the first place? You didn’t even notify the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“Well...”

The children seemed well aware that their rash actions had worried the villagers. Bit by bit, Roqué began recounting their story, head bent in shame.

“We heard that the guardian beast had gone mad.”

“And we wanted to find out for ourselves if it was true.”

“The guardian beast is really kind and always plays with us.”

“But we were afraid that if it really *had* begun attacking people,

it'd get hunted down eventually."

So that was why they had come to check on the Guardian Bear. They couldn't believe that a normally kindhearted beast would attack people, nor that it would be so hostile towards them. As much as their naivety exasperated me, it showed just how gentle and lovable the bear was under usual circumstances.

"What's the matter, Silver-Haired?"

Concerned about what was taking me so long, Marca had come to check up on me.

"I found the kids."

"You did? My, what cuties! What are your names?" Marca beamed at the children. Judging by the way she squatted down to eye level with them, it looked like she was used to dealing with kids. Her manner seemed to put them at ease, and the children happily introduced themselves.

"I'm Roqué." Roqué grinned.

"I'm Lucca," the girl chirped.

"And I'm Lakku," the blue-haired boy answered. I couldn't tell if the devs had been hung up on alliteration or incredibly lazy when naming them. As we already knew, Roqué was a fisherman's apprentice; Lucca was the daughter of a draper, while the polite Lakku was a farmer's son.

"Any idea what caused the Guardian Bear to go berserk?" I asked the children.

"I'm not sure either, but I think it has something to do with the sacred tree. I've never seen it in such an awful state before," Roqué said.

"It's not normally like this, then?"

"Nope! Usually, it looks more alive and has lots of leaves!"

"Not to mention it's weird that there are monsters in this forest!" Lucca added.

"Normally, the cave and sacred tree are free from monsters. The guardian beast keeps them at bay," Lakku explained. Although the sacred tree had inarguably triggered these strange occurrences, no one was sure what had made it wither in the first place.

"In any case, we'd better do something about this tree, don't you think? Isn't there anything we can do?" Marca lamented.

"We definitely should, but... Doubt we can do much unless we pinpoint the root cause," I muttered.

"True..."

Withering trees were pretty much a fantasy RPG staple. That being said, determining the exact cause of the tree's decay was no easy task, given the myriad of possibilities. Common causes included, but weren't limited to, diseases, curses, poison, and parasites. In some

cases, there could be something wrong with the tree deity. It could even be an issue of the water source or soil being contaminated. At any rate, we needed more information.

“Any idea what could’ve weakened the tree?” I addressed the three children.

“Hmm... Sorry, I got nothing.”

“Me neither.”

“I’m equally clueless.”

I supposed we had no choice but to examine the tree. At the same time, I figured I would try treating its symptoms, although I wasn’t sure how effective the results would be.

“Olto, Sakura, give this tree some fertilizer. Don’t forget to water it too.”

“Mm!”

“...♪”

While it seemed a shame to waste such a valuable item on a dying tree, I decided to use the premium fertilizer I’d bought from the old woman’s general store. As much as I longed to use it on my own farm, now wasn’t the time to skimp on resources. I was also able to generate a supply of water with Aqua Create, a new water spell I’d learned on the way here. Incidentally, the water created through this method was of the same quality as well water. Perhaps I’d even be able to create purified water once I reached a certain level, which would be extremely convenient for me. I definitely planned to leverage this skill more often from now on to level up my water magic. Now then, how would the fertilizer and water affect the tree, if at all?

“Our job is to investigate the tree. Rick, Bear Bear, I’m counting on you guys too.”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

Rick shinnied up the sacred tree, quickly becoming a tiny speck. Since the top branches were out of our reach, Rick was our only hope. Bear Bear began circling the tree, wiggling their nose and sniffing the air every now and then.

“We’re gonna go search the flower garden, okay?” Marca called over her shoulder.

“Gotcha. Let us handle this area,” I replied. We had to hurry up and determine the root cause before the Guardian Bear returned.

“Might as well check the hollow first while my monsters search the outside.” I peered inside the entrance tentatively.

“Pretty dark in here.”

Even with the aid of my torch, it was difficult to see what was going on. Compared to the size of the entrance, the inside was surprisingly spacious—I reckoned several adults could fit comfortably.

“Guess I’ll have to go in...”

Since I was but a diminutive halfling, I had no problem squeezing inside. Guided by torchlight, I searched the hollow from top to bottom, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Even the kids hadn’t noticed anything; perhaps we were looking in the wrong place? I ran my hands across every surface for unusual signs, starting with the ground and traveling up the wall, but all I felt was wood. Once I glanced up at the ceiling, however, I spotted a strange black object.

“What’s that...? A thorn? Or is it a horn?”

An ink black thorn the size of a knife was embedded in the roof of the hole. Given how dark it was, it was almost impossible to distinguish it from the background. Had it not been for my torch, I never would’ve noticed it. I stared at the peculiar thornlike object protruding from the trunk of the sacred tree.

“All things considered, it definitely seems sus.”

Honestly, anyone who *didn’t* find it suspicious deserved to have their gaming license revoked. As I brought my torch a little closer, I noticed a black mist rising from the thorn. It appeared to be the same mist surrounding the Guardian Bear and other rabid monsters we had encountered. I tried to assess it, but unfortunately, all it said was “Unknown.” This only served to fuel my anxiety further.

“Hmm. Is it okay to touch this...?”

Given the circumstances, a status infliction wouldn’t be *too* bad. What if the mist tried to possess me, though? Still, it wasn’t like I could walk away from the situation either. *Might as well give pulling it out my best shot then.*

“All right!”

Rolling up my sleeves, I gave the thorn a gentle prod. I poked it several more times for good measure, but nothing happened.

“Ph-Phew. Looks like it’s safe to touch.”

Just to be safe, I waited a few more seconds. Once I was absolutely sure that no harm would come to me, I yanked the thorn.

“Grr... Hnnngrh!”

I pulled with all my might, but to no avail.

“Hiyah! Gah! Aaargh!”

Welp. So much for that. No matter how hard I tried, the thorn refused to budge.

“Either I’m not strong enough, or this thing isn’t meant to be removed in the first place...”

Perhaps someone else would have better luck with it.

“Hey, can you guys come here a sec?” I called to the others outside.

“Silver-Haired? Where are you?” Marca responded.

“Over here.”

“Wow, didn’t know the hole went that deep! Find something?”

“Yep. Mind taking a look?”

Marca jogged over with my monsters in tow. Her teammates were nowhere to be seen; they appeared not to have heard my call due to being farther away. I briefly described the thorn in the ceiling and asked her to have a look.

“Definitely looks suspicious!” she remarked.

“I know, right? It’s gotta mean something.”

“You couldn’t pull it out, though?”

“Nope.”

I told her that the thorn had refused to budge, which gave her pause. She then turned around to ask me a question.

“What’s your Strength, Silver-Haired?”

“Four,” I answered.

“Come again? Four-teen?”

“I said *four*, damn it!”

“No way. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Marca looked incredulous, as if she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. I was utterly serious, though.

“It’s true!” I insisted.

“W-Well, fancy that. Guess it can’t be helped if you haven’t really allocated your stat points well.”

“You don’t have to try to cheer me up, you know. I know for a fact that I’m weak.”

“Ah ha ha...”

Don’t give me that awkward little laugh! What did you expect? My race and job class weren’t exactly known for their strength, not to mention I had neglected to allocate bonus points to my stats. *It is what it is. Me, bothered? Don’t be silly!*

“In that case, let me try.” Marca volunteered.

“What’s *your* Strength, by the way?”

“Fifteen.”

D-Damn. Even she was wildly stronger than me, despite being a Mage. I supposed it made sense, though, seeing how she was nearly level 30 and had already undergone a class change. Of course her stats would be high. I would probably reach that number too, once I’d leveled up. At least, I *hoped* I would...

“All right, time to get down to business. Hrmmph...!”

Marca ducked into the hollow, grabbed the thorn, and yanked hard. Her normally attractive face was contorted by the effort, and I could tell she was trying her best by the way she was gritting her teeth. Her current stance and expression weren’t exactly flattering, though—not that she needed to know that.

“Hnngh...!”

Thanks to Marca sacrificing her beauty, however, something shifted.

“Hey, I think it moved a bit,” I told her.

“Huh? Really? I’ll keep going then!”

It looked like your Strength *did* have something to do with it.

“You can do it, Marca! Come on, Bear Bear, cheer her on!”

“Growl! Growl growl, growl growl!”

“Mm-mm, mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“...!”

One by one, my monsters began shouting words of encouragement. Marca looked positively elated by the outpouring of support.

“*Squee!* I feel invincible! Hiyah! Hrmmph! Aaargh!”

Marca continued to tug at the thorn, her face beet red from the exertion. She tried twisting it up and down, as well as placing her foot on the wall and applying pressure to it. However...

“Ugh, it just *won’t* budge!”

Despite her best efforts, she was unable to pull the thorn out.

“Even you can’t pull it out, huh? Think you can give it a try, Bear Bear? Oh, but it’s too high up for you.”

Bear Bear had leveled up on the way here and was currently at level 13. Their Strength was exactly 20, including the +3 bonus from their equipment. *Hmm, if only the thorn were a bit closer to the ground.* As it stood, the ceiling was too far away for Bear Bear’s height.

“Growl!”

However, Bear Bear thumped their chest reassuringly, as if to say, *Leave it to me!*

“But Bear Bear, you can’t reach that.”

“Growl growl!” Bear Bear persisted, stretching their paws out to me.

“You want me to carry you? Oh well, I don’t mind, I guess.”

I lifted them up by their armpits and carried them over to where the thorn was.

“There. That good enough?”

“Growl!”

Once I’d made sure Bear Bear had grabbed the thorn with both hands, I let go of them. Unsurprisingly, Bear Bear dangled from the thorn, looking like a stuffed animal strung up from the ceiling. Frankly, the sight was more unsettling than cute.

“Eee! What a cutie-pie!”

Marca, on the other hand, looked like she was about to have a nosebleed.

“Groooowl!”

Bear Bear pulled themselves up, then dug their feet into the ceiling for support. That was a pretty impressive position they were in. If they succeeded at pulling out the thorn, there was no doubt they would face-plant into the ground. Regardless, Bear Bear carried on with their task fearlessly. I could see the thorn slowly coming out each time they strained their muscles.

Just as Marca's companions began gathering outside, having noticed we were missing, a loud, unmistakably game sound effect-like *plop!* echoed in the hollow. Bear Bear landed on the ground with a thud, clutching the black thorn tightly in their paw.

"G-Growl..."

"Y-You okay, Bear Bear?"

"Growl."

"Mhm, you did it, bud. Good job."

"Growl!"

I gave them a congratulatory pat on the head, accepting the thorn in turn.

"Now then... Nope, still no luck."

Although we'd managed to pull it out, I was still unable to use my Appraisal skill on it. I decided to ask the others for their opinions.

I stepped outside of the hollow, intending to show the others the thorn. Oddly, though, they appeared to stiffen at the sight of me—or rather, the thorn in my hand.

"H-Hey, Silver-Haired. What's up with that?" one of Marca's companions pointed, voice wavering.

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"There's a black mist coming out of it!" another member yelled. Startled, I glanced at the thorn. They were right: there was a mist enveloping it, and steadily rising.

"What the...?!"

Panicking, I hurled the thorn into the field. It landed among the flowers, but the black mist showed no signs of dissipating. If anything, it seemed to be coming in faster spurts.

"Wh-What is that?!" Marca cried, emerging from the hollow. None of us had the faintest idea what was happening, though. Not knowing what to do, we continued to observe the thorn warily. Gradually, the mist solidified, rapidly taking shape before our eyes. *Uh-oh. Whatever this is, it can't be good.* Within seconds, the thorn had vanished, and in its place stood a black humanoid figure.

"Foolish mortals! How *dare* you interfere with us?!" the shadowy being thundered.

"Um, and who might you be?" I asked timidly.

"I am the apostle of great archdemon Glasya-Labolas! You shall pay dearly for your impudence, humans! Prepare to offer yourselves

as a living sacrifice!”

An event battle?! No way! You’ve gotta be freaking kidding me! As if things weren’t bad enough, the archdemon’s apostle was ridiculously jacked. It was a burly giant with ram horns sprouting from its head, its body pitch-black. Basically, your stock standard demon, minus the wings.

“Roqué! Take your friends and run!” I shouted.

“G-Got it!” Roqué stuttered. If an NPC died in-game, there was a pretty good chance they’d disappear forever. It was better to play it safe and keep them out of harm’s way. I turned to assess the demon next; sure enough, its display name read “Glasya-Labolas’s Apostle.”

“Fear me, mortals!”

A red marker and life meter materialized above the demon, and straightaway, we were flung into battle. Negotiating with it or fleeing was no longer an option.

“Get behind us with your monsters, Silver-Haired!” Marca urged. “Can we count on you to play as support?”

“Will do! It’s not like we’ll be of much use on the battlefield, anyway.”

“Right, y’all know the drill. Get ready, guys!”

“Roger!”

My monsters and I quickly hid behind Marca and her companions. Since there was no telling how strong this enemy was, we could very well die in one hit if we weren’t careful. I fully intended to avoid direct confrontation and commit myself to support the team. This seemed to suit Marca’s party just fine, and they got into formation, shielding us from attack.

“Mwa ha ha ha! DIE!” The apostle cackled.

On the whole, Marca’s party was relatively well-balanced. Marca the Wind Mage served as the team’s healer. Although the Thief was their only recon man, they had three players—a Shield Master, Swordfighter, and Lancer—who acted as vanguards. As far as basic attacks went, their group’s overall strength was pretty high. It also didn’t hurt that each player possessed fairly advanced skills.

“Raieeee!” the demon screeched as it charged towards us at top speed.

“Parry!” The Shield Master countered, deftly warding off its attack. From what I’d heard, Parry was a complex skill that involved deflecting your opponent’s attack with a shield, thereby cushioning the blow. In order for it to succeed, the timing had to be just right—fail to nail it, and you’d end up losing your balance. A successful attempt against a swift boss you’d never encountered required an immense amount of courage and skill.

The Shield Master’s counter successfully knocked the apostle off-

balance. Without missing a beat, the others descended upon the creature. I couldn't help but marvel at their fluid movements and seamless cooperation. So *this* was what advanced players' battles looked like up close.

"Mwa ha ha! Eat this, vermin! Dirty Mist!"

"Oh no, you don't! Wind Cure!"

The demon mainly dealt physical damage using its fists. Occasionally, it utilized special moves that inflicted status ailments, but Marca's magic was able to heal them instantly. While its attacks were pretty hard-hitting, Marca's party was doing a good job keeping up. If it had been my team, we'd probably have been wiped out in a single stroke. Sakura and I did our best to support Marca's group with magic, being careful not to generate too much hate in the process. Bear Bear, Rick, and Olto repeatedly provoked the monster, trying to draw its attention. The battle was going much smoother than I'd anticipated. Being a boss, the apostle obviously had a huge amount of HP; nevertheless, its attack patterns were fairly simplistic, alternating between physical attacks and status ailments. *Hey, we might actually get a clean win at this rate.* Or so I thought...

"Heh heh... *Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!*"

Once we'd got it fifty percent down, the demon started to cackle evilly, throwing its head back in laughter. Clearly, it was up to no good. Sure enough, the apostle began emanating a black aura from its body before declaring the following—words that we couldn't possibly afford to ignore.

"Not bad for a bunch of lowly humans! Very well, I see no reason to hold back any longer!"

I knew it! There you had it: your typical multiphase boss fight transformation.

"Nyeh heh heh heh!"

The demon uttered a sickening, high-pitched laugh as its muscles started to bulge and ripple. Marca and her teammates ganged up on the beast mercilessly, only to have their attacks bounce off it. Evidently, the demon was invulnerable while it was transforming.

"Bwa ha ha! Uncultured swine!"

Look who's talking! Meanwhile, Glasya-Labolas's Apostle continued to undergo an eerie metamorphosis. Its muscles swelled even further, and short bristles began sprouting all over the surface of its body. Approximately ten seconds later, the demon had assumed an entirely different form, looking wholly unrecognizable.

"Awoo! Prepare to be devoured, mortals!" the beast howled.

"Ew..." I couldn't help uttering a groan of disgust at the sight before me. The apostle was now canid in form, large, hairy, and hunched atop two legs. Based on that description alone, you might

even think it was cute. Unfortunately, it was anything but. By dog, I meant it looked like a stray, with wiry, matted fur that was slightly too long. Its eyes bulged out of their sockets, much like the monsters Shigeru Mizuki used to draw, and its reddish-brown tongue hanging out of its mouth evoked a sense of revulsion in me. At first glance, its initial form seemed far more powerful. I was soon proven wrong, though.

“Graaarr!”

“Damn it! Its attack power increased!”

“Guh! I got socked in the head by some invisible force!”

As was the case with most evolving bosses, the beast now attacked us twice in a row. Following its normal attack, it struck out at us with some sort of invisible arm, delaying its blow by a few seconds. In addition, its overall attack power had increased as well. With a single swipe of its claws, it depleted a large chunk of the Shield Master’s HP, despite him blocking its blow with his shield. To top it all off, it started inflicting status ailments more frequently, depleting Marca’s MP at an alarming speed. The tussle was so intense and fast-paced that Bear Bear and Rick were pushed out of the fight. The ultimate kicker was its vexing AoE attack.

“Awoooo!”

The demon unleashed a particularly loud bellow, and a black dome of light began spreading out around it.

“Crap! We can’t avoid it!” I yelled.

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

The Apostle’s attack had such a wide area of effect that even my companions and I got sucked into it. Although Olto and Sakura stepped in front to shield me from the worst of the blow, they were unable to block the attack completely.

“Guh!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

The next instant, I felt a tremendous impact. Considering Rick and I still had a decent amount of HP left, the demon was less powerful than I’d anticipated a boss of this level to be. Regardless, the fact that it was capable of dealing damage to all of us was rather troublesome. Everyone was forced to devote their energies to healing, which weakened our offense.

“Marca! We’ll heal ourselves, so don’t worry about us! You guys just focus on the demon!” I yelled.

“You sure?” she hollered back.

“We’ll be fine!”

To be honest, even if my team ended up respawning, it wouldn’t

really affect the situation at large. If Marca's group so much as lacked one member, though, we'd be in big trouble. Worst-case scenario, I was prepared to become a meat shield or decoy by increasing the boss's enmity towards me.

"Let's really focus on backup, guys."

Healing was our first priority; we could determine our next move after that. If Marca and the others looked like they were in hot water, we'd most likely have to consider sacrificing ourselves. I led my monsters away from the field and retreated to the sacred tree. Thankfully, it looked like the beast was incapable of consecutive AoE attacks. That was a relief. No doubt we would've faced a party wipe if we'd been hit a second time.

"Phew. Here's some medicine, guys."

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...!"

"Now, how can we help these guys out...?"

Just then, I noticed an unusual change in my life meter. Even my MP meter seemed out of whack.

"Don't tell me...my HP and MP are recovering automatically?"

My MP and HP seemed to be recovering at a speed of roughly one point per second, which was unheard of. At this rate, we most likely wouldn't need any healing items to make a full recovery. I glanced around me and saw light flowing into us from the sacred tree.

"This the tree's doing?"

To test my theory, I tried distancing myself from it. Once I was about ten meters away from the tree, the light vanished, and the auto-recovery ceased. Moving closer to it caused the light to engulf me once more and resume the recovery process.

"Bingo."

Looks like we've found a surefire way of fighting the boss!

"Hey! Marca! Get your butts over here, now! The sacred tree grants you an Auto Heal effect!"

Marca and her party members appeared to have heard me, as they slowly inched towards the tree while warding off the demon. All of them seemed in awe at its healing properties.

"Whoa! Check out that recovery speed!"

"We're saved!"

"Good job, Silver-Haired!"

Their praise hit different, especially since I hadn't been able to contribute much. It soon became apparent that wasn't the only effect the tree had, though. Unexpectedly, the demon's status ailment attacks no longer had any effect on us. As a result, we were able to heal the

damage it inflicted on us immediately, and running out of MP was no longer a concern. This caught the beast off guard and enabled everyone to give their all. If it had been just us, however, we probably wouldn't have lasted very long, even with the sacred tree's Auto Heal effect. Crisis averted: we now had an easy victory ahead of us.

"Hey, we might be able to really get this thing down."

Hold on. That's what I thought earlier before it knocked us for a loop with its unexpected metamorphosis. It was perfectly plausible that it still had two more transformations left and would reveal its true powers once it got smaller. *Don't let your guard down just yet,* I reminded myself, staying on my toes. However...

"Take this!" Marca yelled.

"EEYAWRRRR!"

Well, that was easy enough. I guess that sounded about right for a mid-level boss. I did think we would've lost if it hadn't been for the sacred tree's healing powers, though. Perhaps the person who designed this battle assumed we would fight the boss near the tree. Now that I thought about it, if I hadn't thrown the thorn into the field in the first place, we might have had an easier time... *Nah, surely not.*

"What's the matter, Silver-Haired?" Marca addressed me.

"Hm? Uh, n-nothing. W-Was just wondering what kind of drops we got," I stammered.

"That's just it—we got nothing! I didn't even get any items, despite delivering the final blow. I did get a lot of event points, though."

"Guess it's in the same category as Little Devils, then."

"Guess so... Oh!" Marca suddenly gasped. Something appeared to have caught her eye as I was checking my event points and item drops.

"What's up?" I asked, glancing up from my screen.

"I got a message from Kokuten!"

The message had been sent three minutes ago while we were in the midst of battle. No wonder she hadn't noticed it. According to Kokuten, the black mist surrounding the Guardian Bear had dissipated, and the creature had taken off immediately after. He warned us to be on our guard, as it was possible that it was on its way back to the cave. The time stamp on his text coincided with the time we defeated Glasya-Labolos's Apostle.

"What should we do?" Marca murmured.

"Hmm. Reckon we should grab the kids and make a run for it?" I suggested.

"Good idea. That's probably for the best."

After a brief discussion, we agreed that it was best to leave this place for now. We had no idea what state the Guardian Bear was

currently in, not to mention we'd just gotten out of a boss battle. It'd be a total bummer to defeat one monster only to be wiped out the next instant by another.

"Roqué! Time to get outta here!"

"O-Okay! Whatever you say, Mister!"

We hurried onwards to the cave we had come from as soon as we'd joined up with Roqué, Lucca, and Lakku. Unfortunately, we were too late. The blood drained from our faces as we found ourselves backed into a corner.

"Crap, it's that deranged bear!"

"Eek, no way!"

"We're too late..."

"Shit, what do we do?!"

Before we could escape, the Guardian Bear emerged from the mouth of the cave and began approaching us slowly.

"..."

"..."

We stared at each other in silence, neither side taking our eyes off the other. You could almost hear a pin drop—I was sure the rest of the group heard me swallow my saliva. I was starting to feel parched. The bear's eyes were no longer bloodshot; one might even say they looked lucid and intelligent. Perhaps that was just wishful thinking, though. That being said, the black mist had indeed vanished. Defeating the apostle had to have *some* effect, right? We stared at the enormous bear for what seemed like an eternity, although it was probably no more than thirty seconds.

"...Grunt."

Amidst the tense atmosphere, the Guardian Bear lay down and curled up on the spot.

"Huh? Wait, what's going on?"

Was it trying to tell us it meant no harm? While we were trying to make heads or tails of the situation, Roqué and his friends rushed to the bear's side. They had up and left so suddenly that we had no time to stop them.

"Guardian Bear!"

"Grunt!"

"You're back to normal!"

"Grunt grunt."

"Thank goodness!"

The children threw themselves at the Guardian Bear, who looked upon them with a benign expression. It looked like it had regained its genial temperament that Roqué was talking about. It seemed unbothered by the attention, maintaining its composure even as the children clambered up its back.

“Growl growl?”

As a fellow bear, the guardian beast seemed to spark Bear Bear’s curiosity, and they slowly waddled over to the creature’s side. It *was* safe to approach the bear, wasn’t it? In spite of my worries, the Guardian Bear and Bear Bear gazed at each other silently, before promptly conversing in a series of growls and grunts. They appeared to understand each other. Before long, Bear Bear began climbing on top of the Guardian Bear’s back in a playful manner. As soon as they saw that, Olto and Rick sprinted to the beast’s side, vying for its attention. For a split second, I felt myself tense up as the Guardian Bear extended a paw to Olto, but it turned out it was simply helping him up its back. With our previous encounter still fresh in my mind, I couldn’t help feeling nervous, but the bear appeared to have returned to its formerly amiable self.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl.”

My companions had started using the Guardian Bear as a slide. *Careful, guys—don’t try its patience.* Fortunately, the bear remained as serene as ever. Thank goodness it had such a big heart. The children and my monsters playing with the bear was the very picture of tranquility. No doubt this was how things were supposed to be.

“Guess we don’t have to worry about fighting it...”

“Phew.”

Marca and her teammates breathed a sigh of relief; we would’ve been doomed if we’d had to fight it. After a while, the Guardian Bear, finally having freed itself from the younglings, stood up and plodded away from us. I watched the creature, waiting to see if it would head in the direction of the sacred tree. After a few steps, it stopped and glanced over its shoulder.

“Grunt.”

What did it want? The bear fixed its eyes on us, unmoving. Immediately, the three children and my monsters ran after it. The Guardian Bear also motioned to us, as though urging us to follow its lead.

“Hey, think it’s asking us to follow it?” I wondered out loud.

“I think so...” Marca replied hesitantly. Considering my companions had taken a liking to the beast, I supposed it was safe to follow it. We hastened our steps, eager to catch up to the Guardian Bear.

“So it *was* headed for the sacred tree.”

My hunch turned out to be correct. We observed the bear from a distance, being careful not to get in its way. I wasn’t sure why it brought us here, but presumably, something was about to happen. The

bear walked towards the sacred tree before gently pressing its forehead against the trunk. The next instant, the sacred tree lit up, dazzling our eyes.

“Whoa...”

“That’s beautiful.”

“Word.”

The massive tree, aglow with a bluish-white light, was a wondrous sight to behold, and we were utterly entranced. Magical scenes like this were, without a doubt, one of the greatest perks of game worlds. As we gazed at the tree in awe, the light engulfing the tree disintegrated into tiny particles and rained down upon us like a thousand fireflies. While it certainly didn’t seem dangerous, I was nevertheless startled. That seemed to signal the end of our spontaneous quest; shortly, a server-wide announcement rang out.

“Players of this server have successfully resolved one of the incidents in the village.”

“The player Yuto will be awarded the title, ‘The Sacred Tree’s Blessing (Event-Only).’”

Title: The Sacred Tree’s Blessing (Event-Only)

Effect: You have gained 4,000 G and six bonus points. Increases damage towards Archdemon Glasya-Labolas and its minions, as well as lessens damage inflicted by aforementioned monsters.

Hey, I got a title. Fancy that. Since it said ‘event-only,’ did that mean the effects would wear off once the event was over? If that were the case, it didn’t seem like a very practical reward to have. Considering I had very few opportunities to actually engage in battles, I didn’t find much use for these effects either. I did appreciate the extra bonus points, though. I seemed to be the only one who was disgruntled, however—the others had an entirely different opinion.

“Eeep! A title!”

“Holy blazes! No way!”

“D-D-Damn!”

Wait, what? Honestly, I didn’t see what the big deal was. While I stood there racking my brains, Marca and her companions rushed to my side, grinning from ear to ear. They looked giddy with delight.

“Silver-Haired! How can you be so *calm*?!” Marca exclaimed.

“This is a *title* we’re talking about!” another member chimed in.

“Hang on, rumor has it that he has loads of titles.”

“Gotcha! Obviously, you’re used to it then.”

“That’s Silver-Haired for ya.”

Well, looks like they answered their own question. I guess this was

pretty exciting news for people who'd never received a title before. If only I could say the same for myself—my first-ever title hadn't exactly been boastworthy.

“Grunt grunt.”

The Guardian Bear bowed deferentially, its head almost touching the ground. Was it thanking us for defeating Glasya-Labolas's Apostle? Or was it trying to apologize for attacking all those players during its berserk state? In any case, it was evident that the bear had regained its sanity and mellowed considerably.

“Grunt.”

“Hm? What's up?”

The Guardian Bear raised its head towards the sky, then let out a low howl. Without warning, my status window popped up, displaying the message below:

“Please select your reward from the following: Guardian Beast's Sword, Guardian Beast's Spear, Guardian Beast's...”

Apparently, the bear was offering us a special reward. I studied the array of Guardian Beast weapons on-screen with interest. In terms of ability, the items had pretty impressive specs, at least for my level. Enter exhibit A, the Guardian Beast's Staff, which was notably more high-performing than the Giant Dogwood Staff+ I currently owned:

Name: Giant Dogwood Staff+

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 6★ / Durability: 130

Effect: Attack +3, Magic +21, minor decrease in energy expenditure when using water magic, minor boost in water magic attack power, medium increase in energy expenditure when using fire magic.

Weight: 1

Name: Guardian Beast's Staff

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 10★ / Durability: 200

Effect: Attack +10, Magic +30, +100% increase in damage dealt to Archdemon Glasya-Labolas and its minions.

Weight: 3

Unfortunately, it was a tad too heavy for me to equip myself with, not to mention its effects were a bit meh. While it would undoubtedly be beneficial to a player who specialized in fighting, the amount of magic damage I could deal, even with a +100% boost, was negligible. I asked Marca's group for their opinion, and although they agreed that its effects weren't the best, they stated that it could be useful when battling demons. *Hmm, what should I do?* Surely, there had to be

something I could use... The list included some armor as well, but once again, the weight restriction prevented me from wearing them. Stumped, I considered choosing an item at random and giving it to someone who could actually use it.

As I scrolled down a bit further, I noticed an item called “Guardian Beast’s Ingots x2” at the very bottom of the list. *Ingots, you say...?* If we used them to craft weapons, would we be able to create items with effects similar to the other Guardian Beast weapons? There wouldn’t be much point in doing that unless we crafted them *during* the event, though. However, if we could craft weapons or armor out of these, they would most certainly come in handy during our inevitable showdown against the Archdemon Glasya-Labolas. Giving the completed items to Kokuten’s group would likely give them a significant boost in combat power too.

“Hey, Marca. You wouldn’t happen to know if there’s a blacksmith in the village, would you?” I inquired.

“Why do you ask?”

“I was thinking—if we can use the ingots at the very bottom to craft weapons, we might end up with more items than simply selecting one of the other weapons listed.”

“Ingots...? Let’s see...” Marca muttered as she scrolled down. “Ah, found them. Hey, this is pretty dope! If we all choose this reward, we might be able to supply other players with Guardian Beast equipment as well.”

“Right? We’ll need a blacksmith for this plan to work, though.”

“Ah, I get your drift. No worries, there’s a famous blacksmith on this server.”

“There is?”

“Yep. Sukegawa the lewd blacksmith.”

“The *what* blacksmith?”

Did she just say *lewd*? Nah, I must’ve heard her wrong. I didn’t see how those two words would go together.

“Lewd.”

She really did say it! So I heard her right the first time!

“Wh-What did he do to deserve such a disgraceful moniker?” I stuttered. *Sukegawa the lewd blacksmith?* If I were him, I would’ve quit the game ages ago. To think there was someone with an even sadder reputation than me!

“He offers to make stuff for women at a discounted price. The sexier the outfit, the bigger the discount,” Marca answered.

“Ah, gotcha.”

I take back what I said: that name is perfect for him.

“Oh, but that doesn’t mean he charges men more. Just that women can get stuff for cheap,” Marca added.

“Doesn’t that nickname bother him?”

“Apparently, he’s the one that came up with it in the first place.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Beats me.”

I was starting to feel a bit apprehensive about meeting this Sukegawa fellow. Still, he seemed to know his craft well, so I supposed it was worth asking him.

“We’ve decided on the ingots, by the way,” Marca announced.

“You sure? You don’t have to choose the same item as me, you know.”

Even if we used the ingots to craft weapons, I wasn’t sure they would result in the same quality as the ones listed here. Considering the active role they played, Marca’s group was probably better off choosing one of the premade weapons instead. The only reason I chose the ingots was because I couldn’t wield any of the weapons or armor.

“Don’t worry, it’s not like that. We figured this would be better in the long run, especially for the final boss battle.”

Evidently, Marca and her teammates preferred to prioritize our server rank over their individual rankings.

“Anyway, shall we head back to the village?” she suggested.

“Yeah, let’s. Before that, we should meet up with Kokuten and the others,” I replied.

“Since there was that server-wide announcement, I’m sure they’ll have lots of questions for us.”

Marca was right. Once we met up with Siegfried and Kokuten’s group, we were bombarded with questions. While there were plenty of things I wanted to ask myself, I opted to recount our fight with the boss first. On our way back to the village, Siegfried and Kokuten probed us for details about what happened after we entered the cave. It went without saying that they were beyond envious, not only of my title, but about the fact that we had gotten to face off against a powerful opponent. That reminded me—Kokuten’s party’s primary objective was to fight strong monsters. To them, a violent tussle with an unknown boss was far more enticing than a title or reward.

Next, it was the diversionary team’s turn to retell their story. According to them, Siegfried played a huge part in their ploy. While the team had mainly focused on defense rather than offense, the Guardian Bear proved stronger than they thought, driving them to the brink of respawning. That was where Siegfried and his horse came in. The pair gladly accepted the role of pulling aggro, acting as a decoy, and maintaining a careful distance between them and the bear. This bought Kokuten’s group enough time to recover. Once the horse began to run out of steam, the rest of the group stepped back in to pick up

where they left off. By repeating this process, the diversionary team was able to keep the bear's attention focused on them.

"It was all thanks to Silver, really," Siegfried said modestly.

"Silver?" I echoed.

"My beloved horse, of course! Well? Pretty nifty name, don't you think?"

"Oh, right. Knights get to have a steed, don't you?"

"Precisely! As a knight, it's only fitting that I own a white horse! That's why I invested a substantial amount of bonus points during my avatar creation process so I could acquire Silver!"

Siegfried seemed awfully proud about his horse. *Horse, though?* I mean, technically, it *was* a white horse, but... Was he truly okay with having *this* as his noble steed? Its appearance wasn't exactly what I envisioned a knight's steed to be. At any rate, it was definitely no thoroughbred. It had a short muzzle with large, flared nostrils, and a dumpy body that was far from slender. If anything, it was closer to a donkey than a horse. This was likely what you'd get if you made a donkey slightly uglier. In other words, it was downright hideous. *Well, as long as Siegfried's happy...*

"Growl."

"Snort."

"Mmm."

"Neigh."

My monsters appeared to have struck up a conversation with Silver. The next thing I knew, Silver had bent his legs and lowered himself to the ground. Olto and Bear Bear clambered up his back, squealing with delight. Rick immediately followed suit, scampering up Silver's head and grabbing both ears as though he were trying to steer him. Whoa, surely that would piss him off? However, Silver didn't so much as bat an eye as he slowly clip-clopped away, my beaming companions astride his back. *What a kind and caring horsey! I'm so sorry I called you ugly!* Anyway, a tamed monster's virtue was measured first and foremost by their ability to satisfy their master. People may have made fun of my Olto at first, but he was the best tamed monster I could've asked for! I was sure Siegfried felt the same way about his Silver.

After returning to the village, it was time to discuss our next move. After all, word was that there was one more sacred tree that had yet to be found.

"I'm pretty sure there's another event waiting to happen, though," I told Kokuten while the rest of the group relaxed.

"You said there are *two* guardian beasts, right?" Kokuten reconfirmed.

"Yup. One's a Guardian Bear, the other a Guardian Boar."

“In that case, it’s likely that the other sacred tree is withering too. We’ll probably have to watch out for a rampaging giant boar as well.”

“I think so too.”

Regardless, I wanted no part in dealing with the remaining sacred tree. It was by pure luck that we’d managed to avoid respawning this time, and it was obvious that my party wasn’t up to par. I’d only hold the others back if I tagged along. My other concern was that if I ended up obtaining yet another title, the other players might resent me for it. To be honest, that thought scared me even more. For those reasons, I had intended on letting more advanced players handle this task. Unfortunately, it looked like I wouldn’t be able to worm my way out so easily.

“We might need your help with the sacred tree, Silver-Haired. We could use your Arboriculture skill, you know.”

“Aren’t you and your monsters the ones who revived the tree?”

Kokuten and Marca blocked my way, cutting off my escape route. Admittedly, I did give the tree some fertilizer, but surely the boss’s defeat had been the deciding factor? That being said, I couldn’t deny their claims completely.

“You don’t have to be present for the boss battle, but we might need you to come over afterwards, Yuto,” Siegfried declared.

“We’ll defeat the boss, and you can revive the sacred tree!” Marca asserted.

“Uh-huh...”

If they intended on having me join them, I sincerely hoped the tree wouldn’t be too far from the village. Chances were we’d die before we even got there if we had to fight our way through swarms of powerful monsters.

“Any intel at all on the second sacred tree?” I asked.

“Hmm. In any event, I haven’t heard any reports of it yet. No sightings of the Guardian Boar either.”

We resolved to split up in order to gather more information on the remaining tree and beast. Kokuten and Siegfried were in charge of questioning the other players in the server, while Marca and I were tasked with finding out what would happen if we were to craft weapons from our ingots. For starters, we decided to visit Sukegawa, the blacksmith Marca had told me about earlier. Due to my lack of interest, my eyes had completely skipped over it, but apparently, he was running a stall in the village square. Sure enough, I spotted a makeshift stall selling weapons and armor.

“Hi, Sukegawa! How’s business?” Marca greeted the blacksmith.

“Not too good, to be honest. I’m sure I’ll cheer up if you buy something, though,” Sukegawa replied playfully.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I didn’t come to shop today.

There's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Don't tell me it's your boyfriend? In that case, I strongly object. I refuse to stand by and let some rando steal my precious Marca!"

"That's not what I meant, dumbass! Anyway, meet Silver-Haired! You know about him, don't you?"

"Huh? No way. Like, Silver-Haired in the flesh?"

"Yep."

With Marca's introduction, I found myself face-to-face with the famous blacksmith.

"Hi there. I'm Sukegawa, aka the lewd blacksmith. I've heard lots of great things about you," Sukegawa remarked as he introduced himself.

"Uh, hi. I'm Yuto, a Tamer. Guess I'm better known as Silver-Haired these days," I responded likewise. Truth be told, I hadn't expected such a warm greeting from someone with a name like his. I had totally pegged him as a man-hating, womanizing type.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Nothing—just amazed by your moniker, I guess."

"Ah. Did you take me for a man-hater?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Ha ha, not at all. I'm lewd, but that doesn't make me a pervert."

"How are the two different?"

"A pervert goes around ogling women and having creepy fantasies about them. A lech is uninhibited and friendly. Like they say, sharing is caring!"

Uh-huh. I hadn't the faintest clue what he meant. All I knew was that the players around us, especially women, were glaring at Sukegawa with disdain. Given how strictly this game usually dealt with harassment and the like, it was a wonder he managed to last this long without getting his account deleted.

"Gotcha. I didn't want to, but I think I got your drift. Let's just leave it at that, okay?" I sighed.

"Oh yeah? Well, we can discuss this at length some other time."

Hell no. I've heard more than enough.

"Actually, we wanted to show you these," Marca said, pulling out the Guardian Beast Ingots we acquired earlier.

"Whoa! How'd you get them?!" Sukegawa gasped.

"We got them after the boss battle."

"That have something to do with the server-wide announcement we just heard?"

"Exactly."

Marca recounted the events leading up to how we obtained the ingots from the guardian beast. She then explained our plan to use the ingots to mass-produce weapons, which would hopefully give us an

advantage in the inevitable fight against the final boss, the Archdemon Glasya-Labolas.

“Basically, you want me to turn these ingots into weapons, is that it?”

“Would you be willing to?”

“I’ll give you a bargain-basement deal.”

“Huh? You sure?”

“Honestly speaking, this is the perfect opportunity for someone with little to no fighting skills like me to contribute. From the way this event is set up, I’ll probably get points just for crafting weapons with these ingots.”

“Makes sense.”

After some discussion, Marca and her teammates settled on giving all their ingots to Sukegawa. In return, he agreed to make their equipment for free. Any ingots that didn’t get used were his to take, which he could then use to craft and sell weapons to whoever wished to have them. Similarly, I decided to offer Sukegawa my ingots free of charge. As expected, he was reluctant to accept them for free.

Undeterred, I urged him to take them, insisting he would be doing me a favor, and practically forced them upon him. As if gaining a new title hadn’t been bad enough, the onlookers who had been listening to our discussion were now staring at me, as if to say, *Seriously dude?*

Again? If I tried to make money off these ingots or decide who would get to wield the finished weapons, it would only end up worsening the situation. In other words, I had off-loaded the responsibility onto Sukegawa.

“Fine, I get your situation, but...” he sighed. “I owe you one, okay? If you’re ever in need of a blacksmith, just hit me up.”

“Will do.”

“Good, good. I’ll be sure to enlighten you on the true way of the lewd then!”

This might just be the last time we ever meet, mate.

“Anyway, I’ll decide the price of these weapons once I’ve made one sample, okay? After all, I might not get as many points or XP as I want. Regardless, I promise not to charge more than 30,000 G.”

“Wait, really? That cheap?”

Marca looked taken aback at Sukegawa’s words. Imagine thinking 30,000 G was cheap—that was frontliners for you. If Sukegawa really was a top blacksmith, though, his usual services probably cost more.

“What can I say? Gotta contribute to the server, however slight.”

“I feel like you just dug yourself into a hole.”

“That all depends on how good my weapons turn out.”

“Anyway, will you give it a try?”

“Sure thing. On it.”

It looked like my work was done here; the rest I could leave to Marca and her companions.

“Let’s go gather some info, shall we?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl!”

My monsters looked jubilant; they probably thought we were just taking a stroll through the village. Just as we were heading to Cayenne’s house, a familiar announcement stopped us in our tracks.

“It is now noon on Day Four of the event. Here are the results so far.”

Well, will you look at the time? I immediately opened my inbox. The first section I checked was the individual rankings. Last time, my rank had been 274th place out of 298.

“Whoa, seriously? I went up! Like, way up! Guess those three hundred points from the boss battle really helped.”

Amazingly, I now ranked at 46th place in Server No. 29 with a whopping 577 points. Talk about a huge boost. There were still three days left, though, so I was sure I wouldn’t maintain that rank for very long. What was even more shocking, however, was my server contribution rank. To my utter disbelief, I had gone from fourth place all the way to the very top. Was it because I had helped defeat the boss? However, Marca’s group, who had fought the boss together and ultimately finished it off, weren’t even in the top ten. That meant important events weren’t the only ones that mattered. Hmm, what else could I have done...?

“Is it because I’m friends with Roqué? Surely, that can’t be enough to raise my server contribution rank, though?”

I still had no idea how our rankings were determined. Oh well, there was no point dwelling on things I had no way of knowing.
Moving on.

“Wow! We’re in second place!”

Our server rank had gone up one spot, and we were now in second place. That was second place out of thirty-three servers. Did that mean we were making good progress in the event? Seeing how we had defeated a mid-level boss, our predictions and actions had to be on the right track. While I still didn’t know how contribution points were calculated, it was obvious we could boost our server rank by furthering the event’s progress.

“All right! Gotta get the deets on the second sacred tree if we wanna aim for the top!”

Thirty minutes later.

“So, this is where the second sacred tree is located then?” Kokuten looked to me for confirmation.

“Yep. The entrance to the cave is somewhere near these rocks,” I replied. Having finished questioning the NPCs, I had returned to the

square to share the information I'd obtained with the rest of the group. Once I'd turned on screen sharing so everyone could see my map, I proceeded to relate what I'd learned about the tree from the village elders.

Cacal the hunter had been the one who told me the whereabouts of the other sacred tree, which was located deep within a woodland far from the village. According to him, the forest was a perilous place, inhabited by scores of immensely powerful monsters. So great was the apparent risk that he had refused to talk to me at first for fear of jeopardizing our lives. I mean, this was *Cacal* we were talking about. If a super buff, tough-as-nails guy like him said it was dangerous, it had to be pretty bad. I was honestly terrified.

Though Cacal was as stubborn as steel, Roqué and his friends eventually convinced him that we were more than capable, citing how we helped cure the Guardian Bear. Sighing, he finally gave in and told me the location of the tree. I had a feeling that if we hadn't rescued the kids and the Guardian Bear, he wouldn't have been willing to divulge this piece of information. That would have left us with no choice but to find the tree on our own, which would no doubt have been a hassle. *Thank goodness we decided to rescue the kids and the bear.* Meanwhile, Kokuten and the others gazed at the map thoughtfully.

"Thing is, the enemies in this area are equivalent in strength to the ones in Zone Three and Four. That's why not many people have explored it yet," Kokuten explained.

"Good job finding out the location for us, Yuto!" Siegfried praised.

"Siegfried's right. It would have taken us ages if we'd had to search for it ourselves."

I was glad to be of some use, as it was painfully obvious that I couldn't join them on this next expedition. It looked like my job here was done.

"Now to kill some time at the farm and fishing spot while I wait for their return!"

At least, that had been my plan...

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 18

"Hey, ThunderKing. You serious about hunting down the guardian beast? Didn't you hear what the village elders said?"

"What choice do we got if we wanna make it to the top?!"

"B-But... Do you really think it's a good idea to kill it, even after the villagers warned us not to?"

"Okay, *genius*, whaddya suggest we do then? The only reason Highwood's ranked first in the individual rankings is 'cause he defeated that black bear! Ain't that right?!"

“And look what that did to the so-called sacred tree. Isn’t that why the elders begged us to leave the other one alone...?”

“The only way we can outrank that son of a gun is by defeating a guardian beast ourselves!”

“Maybe so, but aren’t you currently in 170th place? Even if you did manage to defeat the beast, I doubt that’d be enough to bump you all the way up to the top.”

“Also, why does *Highwood* get to defeat a guardian beast and not us?! It ain’t fair!”

“You can’t really blame the guy. He didn’t know you weren’t supposed to kill them.”

“Fine, I haven’t heard anything either.”

“Dude, no one’s gonna buy that excuse! Besides, what if we ruin the event by killing the guardian beast?”

“Who cares about *that*?! I don’t give a damn what happens to other players! That settles it. I’m gonna hunt down that giant boar and become number one even if it kills me!”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“Besides, other people are on the move to hunt down that boar too! It’s too late to back out now! Either way, if the outcome’s gonna be the same, I might as well be the one to finish it off!”

“I dunno, man, doesn’t seem like such a good idea to me. Didn’t the devs warn you they’d suspend your account the next time you caused trouble?”

“Eh. Devs, schmevs, whatever. Who cares about that shit?”

“You can’t just ignore them! The devs are keeping an eye on you!”

“Damn it! Why’d they have to give me a yellow card anyway?! All I did was stir the pot a bit!”

“That’s *exactly* what got you into this mess!”

“Besides, I had nothing to do with the incident that happened afterwards!”

“The devs probably deduced that if it hadn’t been for *your* post, those people would never have harassed Silver-Haired.”

“I had no idea those morons would actually take it upon themselves to go after him... Bloody hell, how stupid can they be?!”

“Considering most of them got their accounts deleted or suspended, you’re lucky you got off with just a warning.”

“Shut up! I don’t wanna hear no more!”

“Hey, hold up!”

“C’mon, get your ass mo— Huh? Wh-What the hell are these freaks?! E-Ew, gross! They’re giving me the creeps... Blegh...”

“Crap, they’ve surrounded us! *Mob Devils*? Guess that means they’re demon-type monsters then!”

“Shit! There’re way too many...! Eek!”

“E-Eww! Shoo! Get away from me! H-Help! *Do* something, ThunderKing!”

“R-Right... AAAAAH!”

“Huh?! Wait, don’t leave me! Come baaack!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“Why you...! You cowardly traitor! I’ll make sure everyone in the forums hears about this, you hear me?! Selfish bastard! You’ll never be able to show your face around these parts ever again! EE-EEYGAAH!”

Chapter Five: The Archdemon

Glasya-Labolas

The following afternoon after we defeated Glasya-Labolas's Apostle, I found myself accompanying Kokuten and Marca through the forest leading to the sacred tree.

"Ugh... So basically, this place is full of monsters like the ones we just saw?" I groaned.

"Mhm. Don't worry, though. We'll protect you no matter what," Kokuten reassured me.

"I've no doubts about that, but..." I trailed off, heaving a sigh. *Someone remind me what I'm doing here again...?*

Shortly before noon, Kokuten had called me up, saying he wanted to discuss something.

"I heard the announcement just now. So, you managed to defeat the second boss, huh?" I commented.

"Yeah, we did. We owe it all to you, Silver-Haired. Your information was incredibly useful," Kokuten thanked me. As it happened, our server had made significant progress in the event that morning, with Kokuten's party defeating the other apostle possessing the second sacred tree. The familiar server-wide announcement had informed us that another incident had been resolved, so naturally, I thought that would be the end of it. However...

"So, why exactly did you call me? You've already freed the tree from the demon."

"Unfortunately, not everything went according to plan, you see. We could really use your help."

While the Guardian Boar regained its sanity as expected, Kokuten's party was unable to revive the tree or obtain the event-only Sacred Tree's Blessing, despite receiving weapons from the guardian beast. Furthermore, during their battle with Glasya-Labolas's Apostle, the sacred tree's Auto Heal effect had been considerably weaker. During our fight, we had recovered our HP and MP at a rate of one point per second; in contrast, Kokuten's team had only recovered one point every three seconds. Regardless, they still smashed the beast, which showed just how ridiculously strong they were.

After discussing the issue with Marca's group, they came to the conclusion that my fertilizer and Sakura's tree magic might have had

some sort of effect on the sacred tree. That still left us with one problem, though.

“Um, let’s be honest. There isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that I’d survive the trip at my current level.”

As it stood, I was barely getting by in Zone Two. Going into a forest that was teeming not only with Zone Three, but Zone *Four*-level monsters was like walking into a death trap. It was basically a DIE mission—i.e., Death is InEvitable.

“We’ll protect you every step of the way, so won’t you please consider coming with us?” Kokuten pleaded.

“There wouldn’t happen to be any other farmer-types around...?”

“Nope. Just you.”

“Thought so.”

I suspected as much, since no one else seemed to be taking on any of the Adventurers’ Guild’s quests that required Farming skills.

“Never fear, Silver-Haired! I’ll protect Bear Bear for you!” Marca chirped.

“What about the rest of us?!”

Although I had my doubts, there was no denying the sacred tree played an important role in this event. I supposed I didn’t have much of a choice here.

“Fine... I’ll come with you,” I sighed.

“Brilliant. Thanks, Silver-Haired.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s do our best, guys.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

“...!”

There we go! Hadn’t seen that group salute in a while. My companions seemed awfully psyched about our trip, though. *You guys do realize we’re headed somewhere dangerous, don’t you?*

And that was how I found myself on this pilgrimage to the second sacred tree, under the protection of Kokuten and Marca’s parties. Like Cacal warned us, the monsters in this forest were extremely vicious, massive in stature and prone to aggression. With every encounter, a fierce battle ensued. My party mostly stayed out of the cross fire, cowering behind Kokuten and Marca each time a fight broke out. Regardless, every now and then a stray would slip past their defenses, or one capable of long-range attacks would take a shot at us. As a matter of fact, I was currently being attacked by an Orc who had managed to sneak past unnoticed.

“Hwooor-gaw!”

The Orc had a ghastly appearance. A pair of mean eyes stared out

of its piggish face, and at nearly two meters tall, it towered over my companions and me. The dirty pink flesh covering its flabby body was far too realistic; I could scarcely believe it was computer-generated. Honestly, the half-naked Orc looked like it could very well get reported for sexual harassment. I couldn't help being repulsed by the sight of its sweaty skin folds jiggling each time it ran. Evidently, it wasn't a tameable monster, as I was unable to select it with my skill. Even if I could, though, I hadn't the slightest desire to tame such a hideous creature.

"Eeep! It's coming!"

"Mmm... *Mm-mm!*"

"Olto!" I yelped pitifully as my gnome got catapulted by the blow. Although I appreciated his gallant efforts in shielding me, he had failed to stop the Orc's attack completely.

"Snrrt."

"D-Damn it! Aqua Ball!"

"Hwooor-gaw!"

"Fat load of good that did!"

The Orc shifted its target and charged at me next. Panicking, I quickly countered with a water attack, but was only able to deplete about ten percent of its HP. Not only that, but my attack hadn't even caused any staggering or knockback, which meant my current water magic level wasn't high enough to deal substantial damage to the Orc at all.

"Snort!"

"Eeek!"

The Orc's cudgel was inches away from me. Admittedly, the word "cudgel" might not sound like a very big deal, as it was usually considered one of the crappiest starting weapons in most RPGs. In this hyperrealistic game world, though, it was another story entirely. Imagine a massive club fast approaching you, wielded by a hulking two-meter giant. Not only was it terrifying, but also nerve-racking. Dodging it was out of the question: it was moving way too fast, and moreover, I was utterly petrified. It was a sheer miracle I managed to keep my eyes open.

"Guh...!"

The Orc's cudgel sent me flying through the air. *Shit*, that single blow took *ninety* percent of my HP! Even worse, typical to bludgeoning weapons like this, I was momentarily stunned.

"Snort snort."

"Grr..."

The bastard *laughed* at me! *So you find other people's misfortunes funny, do you?!* However, I had no means of escaping, and everyone but Olto was too far away to help me.

“...!”

I caught a glimpse of Sakura racing towards me out of the corner of my eye, but there was no doubt the Orc would finish me off first. I was screwed. All I could do was bemoan my ill luck.

“Damn it...”

“Silver-Haired! Aqua Ball!”

“Hrgaw!”

“Whoa!”

I-I’m saved! The Mage in Kokuten’s party had rushed to my aid and blasted the Orc off its feet. Even more impressive was their Aqua Ball, which was orders of magnitude more powerful than mine, having depleted more than sixty percent of the Orc’s HP. I supposed it was only fair, considering their Intelligence and skill level were that much higher.

“All right, Silver-Haired?” the Mage looked at me with concern.

“Y-Yeah, thanks to you,” I managed to say.

“Here, drink this potion.”

“It’s okay, I have my own.”

“You sure? Well, no need to hold back, okay? We can’t have you die out here, after all.”

“Thanks.”

I healed my monsters with Monster Heal before taking out some medicine for myself.

“You guys all right?”

“Mmm.”

“Growl.”

“...”

“Chirp...”

Olto, Bear Bear, and Sakura, having acted as my shields, were in bad shape. While Rick’s role as a diversionary agent had kept him out of the line of fire, he still seemed mentally exhausted from being chased around by the brute. Not that I knew if monsters experienced mental fatigue too—I just thought that might be the case, judging by the way his movements had slowed.

“You did good too, Rick. Hang in there.” I encouraged him, patting his head.

“Chirp!”

Rick balled his tiny paw into a fist and flexed his bicep, as if to reassure me he could still keep going. *Strong and cute, that’s my little guy!* We continued fighting our way through the forest for another thirty minutes, doing our best to fend off the onslaught of superior (to us) monsters.

“W-We made it!”

Battered and bruised, we finally made it to the cave that led to the

sacred tree. I couldn't help sinking to the ground in relief when I saw the entrance, even though we still had a ways to go.

"Good job, Silver-Haired," Kokuten said consolingly.

"Same to you. Sorry to be such a drag on you guys."

"Not at all. We're the ones who asked you to come along in the first place."

"Don't mention it. To be honest, it was nothing but good news all around for us. I even got to level up despite hardly fighting."

During this journey, my monsters had each gained two levels, while I had gained a whopping three.

"There aren't any more monsters ahead, so you can relax."

"Really? Phew. Good to know."

Defeating Glasya-Labol's Apostle had apparently gotten rid of all the monsters in this area. Just to be safe, Kokuten's teammates sandwiched us between them and stood guard, allowing us to stroll leisurely through the cave. Other than Olto wandering off to mine items every now and then, nothing notable happened. A familiar sight greeted us once we exited the cave. Much like the location of the first sacred tree, a field of flowers bloomed in the center of the forest. In the midst of it all was a tall and languid tree, seemingly sapped of life.

"That the guardian beast protecting this area?" I mouthed. An enormous boar, far larger than any I'd ever encounter in real life, lay at the foot of the tree. The creature was none other than the Guardian Boar, protector of this sacred tree and forest. Sensing Kokuten drawing near, the beast slowly rose to its feet and made way for him. Did it understand that we wanted to attend to the tree? The creature gazed upon us serenely, and despite its size, I didn't feel threatened at all. I sensed the same sort of vibe I got from the Guardian Bear.

"Looks just like the other sacred tree when we first found it."

The leaves had withered and shed, its roots dry and brittle. Cracks were beginning to form on the surface of the trunk. It was glaringly obvious that the tree's life was in danger. Given that it still looked pretty dead despite the demon having been vanquished, there had to be some other factor essential to reviving the tree.

"Right, we're gonna do the same thing we did with the first tree. You guys ready?"

"Mm-mm!"

First up, I gave Olto a bag of premium fertilizer to sprinkle around the tree. Perhaps regular fertilizer would have worked just fine, but I figured it was better not to chance it. *Gotta take one for the team*, I convinced myself as yet another valuable item left my inventory.

"...♪"

Meanwhile, Sakura worked her magic on the tree. She appeared to be using two types of spells: one that accelerated the plant's growth

and one that healed it.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

While I wasn’t sure just how effective they would be, I decided to apply Rick’s Pruning skills and Bear Bear’s Cultivation skills as well. It couldn’t hurt to try, even if they ended up having no effect. Rick shinnied up the trunk to prune the dead branches, while Bear Bear brought their hands together at the foot of the tree as though offering a prayer. I let my companions call the shots, and after some time, the guardian beast slowly got to its feet again. It then walked over to the tree and pressed its snout against the trunk in a familiar gesture.

“Could this be...?” I wondered, recalling the time the Guardian Bear revived the first sacred tree. The next instant, the exact same scene replayed before our eyes.

“Wow, so *this* is the sacred tree revival event! What a sight!” Kokuten exclaimed.

“So pretty...”

“This is sick!”

This being their first time, Kokuten’s party stood rooted to the spot, gaping in wonder at the sight before them. Marca and I reacted in a similar fashion, despite having witnessed this scene already. As we looked on, the giant tree glowed bluish-white before transforming into hundreds of firefly-like light particles. No matter how many times I witnessed it, this scene never failed to impress me. Shortly, a familiar announcement brought me out of my reverie.

“The player Yuto already possesses the title ‘The Sacred Tree’s Blessing (Event-Only).’ Consequently, Yuto will be awarded the skill, Tree Magic.”

Curiously enough, I didn’t get a title this time. Not that it mattered, but why tree magic? It looked like in the unlikely event that a player was to get the same title, they would receive a skill instead. While Elves and Halflings were capable of learning tree magic, I had yet to fulfill the requirements. As such, the skill hadn’t shown up on my list of obtainable skills yet. I was absolutely thrilled to have gotten so lucky.

“Check it out! I got a title!”

“Woo-hoo!”

I was glad to learn that Kokuten and his companions had obtained titles too, seeing as they had quite literally carried us on their backs. I felt they would’ve snapped if they had failed to obtain a title after all that.

“Glad I could contribute a bit...” I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“A bit?! You deserve a medal!” Kokuten clapped me on the back.

“I take my hat off to you, Silver-Haired. All hail the Silver-Haired Effect!”

“I hereby dub you Epic Silver.”
Hmm. They are praising me...right?

We returned to the village in the afternoon, having successfully revived the sacred tree. After a short rest, we met up with Sukegawa and began discussing our next move—or rather, the others did; I was more of an onlooker, merely nodding and uh-huhing every now and then. The only thing I was good for was healing the sacred trees anyhow. Now that both trees had been fully restored to health, there was nothing more I could do. At the moment, we were huddled around Sukegawa, examining the weapons he had crafted.

“This here staff is made with one of those ingots,” Sukegawa explained. Since the Guardian Beast Ingot alone wasn’t enough to create a larger weapon like a staff, he’d apparently melded it with a copper ingot to produce the following:

Name: Guardian Beast’s Staff (Replica)
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 5★ / Durability: 150
Effect: Attack +8, Magic +27, +66% increase in damage dealt to Archdemon Glasya-Labolas and its minions.
Weight: 2

“I also opted not to change anything and stuck with the default appearance.”

Now that he mentioned it, the weapon looked exactly like the Guardian Beast Staff I saw when I was selecting my bonus. That being said, although it was pretty much a carbon copy of the aforementioned item, its stats were slightly inferior. I pulled up the screenshot I took of the original weapon and compared the two side by side:

Name: Guardian Beast’s Staff
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 10★ / Durability: 200
Effect: Attack +10, Magic +30, +100% increase in damage dealt to Archdemon Glasya-Labolas and its minions.
Weight: 3

Perhaps most importantly, the +100 percent damage increase to Archdemon Glasya-Labolas and its minions had dropped to a mere 66 percent. That was hardly a negligible difference. Would it have been better if we’d chosen the premade Guardian Beast weapons instead? While I questioned my decision, Kokuten and Marca’s parties

expressed an entirely different sentiment, murmuring excitedly as they turned the sample over in their hands.

"This is even better than I expected!"

"I say we're better off making more of these than having only one each of the originals."

"I've got a pretty good idea of what I'm doing now that I've made one. Figure I can bump up the quality one or two stars next time." Sukegawa reckoned. As someone who was meticulous about his work, he evidently wanted to experiment with ingredients other than copper ingots. To that end, he intended to gather ingredients from other players before he made another attempt.

"I suppose I *could* use my own, but unfortunately, I don't have enough iron ingots to go around. Ideally, I'd like to buy a few tinstones from someone."

"Tin? You want tinstones?" I echoed. I actually had a few of those. As a matter of fact, I'd managed to obtain them from the mining nodes in the cave leading to the second sacred tree. Sukegawa reflected on this information for a moment.

"Gotcha... I did have a feeling that forest was similar in level and difficulty to Zone Four."

By the sound of it, I gathered there were mining points for tinstones in Zone Four. As it was, tinstone was a useless piece of metal, even worse than copper. However, when combined, the two produced bronze and increased in durability.

"Well, I've already got copper. Think I'll go check out that cave with some of my blacksmith friends."

"We'd be happy to lend you a bodyguard."

"Thanks! Heh heh, can't wait to put my skills to the test!"

I never knew tin could be used that way. I could easily find copper ores alongside the river; perhaps I could try making some bronze equipment once the event was over. On second thought, maybe not: there was no way I'd be able to equip myself with such heavy gear.

"I'm off! Catch you guys later!" Sukegawa hollered as he dashed away, unable to contain himself any longer. Meanwhile, our discussion was still ongoing. Our next point of order was about exploring the rest of the playing field. Kokuten, Marca, and Siegfried pored over their maps, speculating the whereabouts of Glasya-Labolas, the alleged boss of this event.

"So there aren't any more miasma monsters near the sacred tree, then?" Kokuten confirmed.

"None, as far as I could tell," Siegfried replied.

"At the very least, I didn't spot any around the first sacred tree," Marca added. Now that both sacred trees and guardian beasts had returned to normal, the black mist appeared to have disappeared

completely.

“Same thing with the forest where the second sacred tree is. I received reports that the mysterious black monsters there had vanished too. Some parties even mentioned that they witnessed the monsters return to normal after the mist dissipated before their eyes,” Siegfried continued.

“Does that mean the apostles were responsible for spreading the black mist then? What do you think, Silver-Haired?” Kokuten turned to me.

“Huh? Well, yeah, I guess.”

“Thought so.”

Why are you asking me? It was absurd that I was involved in a discussion with the top players of this server in the first place. Anyway, it was only through pure dumb luck that I’d managed to obtain important information. I just wanted to relax again, see the sights, and hang out with the NPCs. I mean come on, did you *hear* what these guys were talking about?

“Looks like those miasma monsters are still present in *this* area, though,” Siegfried said thoughtfully.

“Right. You’re talking about the area farthest from the village, aren’t you?” Marca nodded.

“You won’t encounter any monsters lesser than Zone Four-level there, which is why most players haven’t explored that area.”

“I’ve a feeling there might be something there, though,” Kokuten mused.

“I think so too,” Siegfried agreed. “That might just be where Glasya-Labolas is.”

“At the risk of respawning, we ought to scout out the area,” Marca chimed in. Considering how I’d almost died earlier, I wouldn’t last a second in a place riddled with Zone Four-level monsters.

“What do you say, Silver-Haired?” Kokuten smiled.

“Uh, I think my answer’s pretty obvious... No way I’m going to such a dangerous place. I’ll leave the rest to you guys.”

“Aww, come on, don’t be a party pooper! Join us!”

“It was mostly thanks to you that we managed to revive both sacred trees. Frankly, I’d feel much more at ease knowing you had our back...”

Don’t think you can fool me, Marca—I know you just want to spend more time with Bear Bear! Same goes for you, Kokuten. Gimme a break.

“You guys flatter me, but the answer’s still no. I’ll just drag you down!” I shook my head adamantly.

“That doesn’t bother me at all! Besides, weren’t you thrilled about leveling up during the boss battle? We get to face an even stronger opponent this time, so you’re bound to level up again.”

Marca had a point. As intense as they were, those battles did have their perks. However, I'd never been one to place my bets on high-risk, high-return scenarios, preferring to stick to low-stakes situations instead.

"True, but there's some stuff I wanna do in the village. If you need my monsters' help again, just let me know," I said with an air of finality.

"A shame you aren't coming with us, but I guess we can't force you." Kokuten shrugged.

"Aww! Bear Bear, my sweet!"

"Sorry, Marca! See ya!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Growl growl!"

I told the group to give me a call if they found themselves in need of farming-type skills again, and made a hasty escape. If I'd continued chatting with the bear-crazed Marca, I was afraid she would have eventually talked me into accompanying them. My monsters and I fled the square, casting a sidelong glance at Marca as her teammates restrained her in a full nelson. At last, it seemed like we'd be able to spend a chill afternoon fishing. Like I said, there were plenty of things I wanted to do, such as discovering new foods, catching fish, and hanging out with the villagers.

"Let's go, everyone! Today's Day Five, meaning there are only three days left in this event. Who's ready to catch some fish?!"

"Mm!"

While Olto, Rick, and Sakura raced ahead of me, Bear Bear waved their front paws, trying to catch my attention.

"Don't tell me you're gonna try fishing with your bare hands?"

"Growl!"

If I wasn't mistaken, that river seemed quite deep. Oh well, who was I to stop them? I mean, they *were* a bear. *Who knows? They might actually have a decent shot at it.*

"Okay, bud. Break a leg."

"Growl growl!"

As I was chatting with Bear Bear, I noticed that the people around us seemed oddly on edge. Both players and NPCs were pointing in the same direction, gasping in shock.

"What's going— Huh?! The heck is *that*?!"

My jaw dropped at the sight before us. Far, far ahead, beyond even the forest, a black pillar rose steadily into the sky. It had to be nearly ten times higher than the surrounding trees. Seeing how the surface shimmered and rippled, the pillar was clearly formed of some sort of amorphous substance.

"That thing's made out of black mist, isn't it...? *Definitely* has

something to do with the event. Welp, there goes my relaxing afternoon by the lake.”

Come to think of it, wasn't that near the area that was still overrun by those miasma monsters? *Hello, this clearly rang alarm bells!* As we all stared anxiously at the pillar, something even more alarming happened.

“GRAARRR!”

“Eek!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

A low, guttural growl thundered across the village. My companions flinched at the beastly sound, hair standing on end. Even the normally coolheaded Sakura looked worried.



“Is that pillar moving...?”

After a while, the surface of the pillar began to ripple violently, as though it were swarming with thousands of wriggling worms. It then started to swell eerily from within. The pillar continued to shift in shape and size without cease, emanating a clear sense of foreboding.

“Silver-Haired! Are you seeing this?!”

“Oh, hey, Marca. Must be some kind of event.”

“I had a chat with Kokuten and the others, and we decided to go check it out. What about you, Silver-Haired?”

“Uh-uh. Like I said earlier, I’ve no business going there. I’ll leave it to you guys.”

“Sure you won’t come with us, Yuto?”

“Let’s be real, Siegfried. I’ll just slow everyone down.”

“You really think so? Fighting aside, I’m sort of looking forward to seeing what other tricks you have up your sleeve. It’d be great if you could join us in that sense.”

Ouch. You didn’t have to remind me... Well, I suppose if I—or rather, Bear Bear—was there, they would serve as a great morale booster for Marca. The same could be said for the others too—if there were more fans of my monsters, that was.

“Nope. No can do.”

If my companions died before Marca’s eyes, it would just make matters worse. In fact, that was a likely outcome.

“Ha ha, all right. I won’t press any further,” Siegfried chuckled.

“Aww, but...”

“Come on, Marca. Let it go.”

“Damn it.”

As we were arguing...

“It is now noon on Day Five of the event. Here are the results so far.”

Huh. Time sure flies. Seeing Marca was already reading her message, I decided to check my inbox too.

“Let’s see... My individual rank has gone down a bit. Figured as much.”

Yesterday, I’d been in 46th place; today, I’d dropped to 66th place. As it happened, the slight boost I’d received from the mid-boss battle was nowhere near the number of points those on the front lines earned.

“What’s your rank, Silver-Haired?” Marca asked me.

“Sixty-six. You?”

“I’m in 22nd place!”

As one would expect, her rank was higher than mine. I wasn’t disappointed in the least, though. After all, I’d never expected to do well in the individual rankings. Frankly, 66th place was a godsend.

“Check it out, you’re number one in the server contribution rankings. Way to go! I’m only in 12th place.”

“Why me, though? Both you and Kokuten took out a boss. Shouldn’t you be ranked higher?”

“This is just a guess, but it probably has something to do with how well you get along with the villagers.”

“That so?”

“Mhm. Makes sense, seeing how the top ten players are people who interact a lot with the NPCs, like Siegfried and Sukegawa.”

“Sukegawa too?”

“Yup. He said he’s been staying with the village blacksmith and crafting all sorts of items at their place.”

Maybe I’d gotten this server contribution thing all wrong. Perhaps it wasn’t determined by how much you’d contributed to the event’s progression or server rank, but how much you’d contributed to the NPCs and village. That would explain things: I *had* found the missing children, as well as helped out on several farms.

“But what about the other players? Don’t they hang out with the villagers much?”

“Not really. I mean, sure, people have started greeting the villagers ever since finding out you need to be on good terms with the NPCs to boost your server contribution rank, but it’s still a challenge for fighter types.”

Without crafting skills, it was hard to find ways to help the villagers. While there were a few jobs that involved carrying stuff, most people found them a chore and were unwilling to go out of their way to do them. In any case, it was much more efficient to use that time to fight instead. Ultimately, most players focused solely on quests from the guild to earn points.

“Oh!” Marca gasped.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Our server rank! We’re in first place!”

Hearing that, I quickly scrolled down. Marca was right: we’d finally snagged the top spot. As glad as I was to be in first place in the server contribution rankings, I was far more excited about our server being number one.

“We did it!”

“We sure did. Must mean our server’s made the most progress so far.”

“Totally! We’ve got to make sure the next event goes well if we wanna protect our current rank!” Marca declared, settling a determined gaze on the black pillar.

“Right, we’ll be off now!”

“Good luck.”

“Bye, Bear Bear! I’m gonna make you proud, okay?!”

“Growl growl!”

“Squee! You’re too adorable for words! I wouldn’t mind fighting for a hundred more years as long as you’re by my side!” Marca squealed, hugging herself, a tortured look on her face. I felt like she was becoming a little OOC, to be honest.

“Come along now. Stop bothering Silver-Haired.”

“Time to go. Chop chop.”

“Byeeee, Beeeear Beeeear! I’ll be baaaack!” Marca trilled as her companions half dragged her with them. They apparently intended to go all the way to the foot of the pillar, or at least within close range if that proved impossible. I really hoped they’d make it back safely from their reconnaissance trip... Still, I reckoned they’d be fine. For all their eccentricities, they were some of the best players this server boasted.

After ten minutes, we paused in our halfhearted search of the village to study the black pillar, which continued to ripple dangerously. Bear Bear and Rick had gotten bored and were napping at my feet, the former curled into a ball with the latter sleeping on top of them in the same position.

“GRAAAWWRRRRRR!”

“Now what?”

I had lost track of how many times we’d heard that growl by now—or rather roar, I should say. At any rate, the sound was particularly loud this time, practically earsplitting. Even I reeled from the shock.

“Mm-mm!”

Olto clung to my leg for dear life, frightened by the noise. Even Sakura, who normally appeared unfazed by anything, was clutching tightly at the hem of my robe. Evidently, the sound had unnerved her as well. Immediately after that thunderous roar rang out, the black pillar’s movements began to intensify. Even from afar, you could tell that the surface was bubbling. That wasn’t the only change either. Without warning, not one, but *two* black, hornlike bumps sprouted from the pillar. The horns gradually grew bigger, gaining definition, followed by a drastic transformation from the pillar.

“...Looks like some sort of creature.”

“Mm.”

“You think so too, Olto?”

“Mm!”

The two bumps now resembled a pair of outstretched arms, and the topmost part of the pillar, which had begun to rise ever so slightly, looked like some kind of head. No, it wasn’t just my imagination. No longer was the black pillar a wavering, amorphous mass, but rather a black statue of some sort, clearly humanoid in shape. Being too far away, I was unable to assess it, but I thought it looked similar to

Glasya-Labolas's Apostle, the mid-level boss we had fought.

"Could that thing be Glasya-Labolas?"

No way. It was far too big. I mean, come on, the thing was nearly three times larger than the trees in the forest. *Fight that monstrosity?* I wouldn't stand a chance in hell.

"Please tell me I'm overthinking it."

Unfortunately, my optimism was short-lived, as the situation steadily continued to take a turn for the worse.

"...Damn, it really *is* a demon."

Ten more minutes later, the former pillar had completed its metamorphosis.

"Looks just like Glasya-Labolas's Apostle before it changed into its second form..."

The demon had the same bodybuilder-esque physique and matte, obsidian skin. Apart from having two pairs of horns—dragon-like and backwards-facing rather than ram-shaped—and being far larger than Glasya-Labolas's Apostle had been, there was no notable difference between the two. Obviously, its size was the biggest issue, though.

"...Surely, Kokuten and the others will take care of it, right?"

All I could do was pray for their success. After all, there was no way I could take on that thing. While I was willing to help if they required my assistance, I would much rather not have any part to play in it at all.

"Well, what now...? Can't just stare at this black pillar all day..."

There was no telling what would happen next, and it was perfectly possible that Glasya-Labolas [TBD] would take several more hours to fully metamorphose. Anyway, I was sure that plenty of people were keeping an eye on the beast, so I was bound to know if there was any major change. Having said that, I didn't have the guts to leave the village to go fishing. Who knew what sort of strange things were happening out there? Worst-case scenario, there could be a massive outbreak of black mist monsters.

"Where else can I fish, though...?"

"Mm?"

"Wait, I've got it," I recalled, Olto jogging my memory. There *was* one place in the village where I was likely to catch some fish. I decided to head to the farm pond that I hauled water from each day. The pond was at least twenty-five meters across, with various aquatic plants growing around it. Given its environment, I wouldn't be surprised if it was home to some fish, despite it being an artificial lake. Although I wasn't sure if I could catch anything since I hadn't actually seen any fish, I could still gain XP simply by dangling my fishing line in the water. Even if I failed to catch any fish, at the very least, I'd be able to level up my Fishing skill.

“I’ll consider anything I catch an added bonus.”

If I was successful, I’d be able to make pork and vegetable miso soup again, which I could offer to the others as my meager contribution to the boss battle. I was about to set off for the pond with that intent when all of a sudden, several female players closed in around me. *Seriously, what gives?* Seeing the blazing looks in Amelia and the other women’s eyes, my heart nearly stopped for a second.

“Silver-Haired!” Amelia barked.

“Y-Yes?”

Hearing the edge to her voice, I instinctively braced myself for a confrontation. As it turned out, however, she hadn’t come to gripe or heckle me.

“Time to fulfill your promise!”

“Huh? What promise?”

“You said if we fought the boss bear and sacrificed our lives, you’d let us take a screenshot, remember?!”

“Damn straight! Just so you know, we went out in a blaze of glory!” Another member chimed in. They appeared to be one of the parties that had gone up against the Guardian Bear with Siegfried and consequently respawned. Their intense stares weren’t born out of some grudge, but excitement at the prospect of taking photos of my monsters.

“I see...” I mumbled.

“You know, considering we’re in the final stretch and all.”

“Exactly. You better let us take our screenshots before the event ends.”

Once the event was over, all players would get transported back to their original location. People who were based near the Town of Beginnings would likely be able to visit me anytime, but for those camped farther away, traveling would no doubt be a chore. It made sense that they wanted to get a screenshot now while things were more convenient.

“Gotcha. Be my guest.”

“Really? Yay!”

“Thanks so much!”

“Woo-hoo! Huzzah!”

Jubilant cheers erupted from the crowd the minute I gave them the go-ahead. Some even went so far as to do a happy little jig. I had to admit that made me cringe a bit. Were they *that* crazy about my monsters?

“Anyway, who’s your pick? My monsters are all cute. I guarantee no matter who you choose, you can’t go wrong.”

Did that sound kinda sleazy? *Nah, surely not*, I dismissed the thought, pretending not to notice the extremely lewd grins plastered

all over the women's faces.

"I choose Gnomey!"

"B-Bear Bear, please!"

"I-I vote for Rick!"

"*wheeze* Olto *wheeze*..."

H-Huh. It looked like my monsters' fans were pretty evenly distributed, save for Sakura.

"Okay, okay, I got it! Jeez, can you stop *breathing* so loud?!"

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself." The woman panted heavily. I decided to let Amelia, the Tamer who chose Olto, go first, as she already knew what kind of photo she wanted.

"Come to mama!" Amelia cooed.

"Mm?"

Olto gave me a questioning look as though unsure if it was safe to follow her.

"Go on, bud. Humor her for a bit, will you?"

"Mm-mm!"

"Good Gnomey. Follow me, please."

Hmm. Not gonna lie—the way Amelia was grinning while beckoning Olto to come over gave off a really sketchy vibe. One could even say she looked like a pervert or predator. Honestly, I didn't blame Olto for being hesitant. Even Amelia's rabbit monster, who was perched atop her head, had an exasperated look on its face. How far gone did you have to be to have your *own* monster look at you in that way...? I silently vowed never to sink to such depths. Amelia led Olto to a flower garden in a corner of the village and made him sit on the ground hugging his knees to his chest. She then proceeded to make a few more minor adjustments, tweaking the position of his hands and the angle of his neck until every detail was to her satisfaction. At last, after roughly ten minutes of hands-on coaching, she finally took her screenshot.

"Squeee! It's absolute perfection!"

Amelia showed me the photo she'd taken, which showed Olto with one cheek resting on his knee, gazing at the camera with a wistful expression on his face. There was something oddly sensual about the whole setup, down to the flower petals blowing about in the wind in the background. All in all, it looked as though it had come straight out of an idol's photo book. Since I'd set a limit to one screenshot per person, she must have poured her entire heart and soul into this one photo. Amelia kept on grinning, evidently pleased that she'd managed to nail the perfect shot.

"Hey, Silver-Haired. Mind if I share this pic in the forums?" she asked.

"Actually, I'd rather you didn't. I've no idea how many more fans

of my monsters are out there, but I can't have loads of people dropping in on us."

While it seemed unlikely I would be accosted by a crowd of hundreds, I was already having a hard enough time dealing with just twenty people.

"Aw, shucks. I was looking forward to showing off to everyone," Amelia tutted.

"Well, I don't mind you showing it to your friends. Just be sure to tell them not to badger me, okay?" I offered as a compromise.

"Of course! No need to worry about that. I wouldn't dream of causing trouble for my dear sweet Olto!"

Well, I supposed it was safe to take her word for it. To be honest, if my monsters really were *that* popular, I could probably turn a pretty profit by charging people 1,000 G each or so for a photo op. It certainly seemed like something worth considering if I ever found myself short on cash.

"My turn!" the next player chirped.

"Let's see, you wanted Bear Bear, right?"

"Yup! All wight, Bear Bear, be a good teddy and fowwow mama, okay?"

"Wowzers..." I felt the word tumble out of my mouth in disbelief. Sure, I kind of got why the woman had suddenly regressed to baby talk, seeing how Bear Bear was practically a living, breathing teddy bear and all, but... The fact that she was being so shameless in front of all these other players seemed to demonstrate just how irresistible Bear Bear's charm was. Moreover, I appeared to be the only one put out by the baby talk; the others seemed to be all for it.

"Be a darling and squat dere fow me, pwease."

"Growl."

"Aww, aren't you the cutest widdle cuddle muffin? Oh yes, you aaare."

Why do adults talking in a baby voice sound so unbearably cringeworthy? If I hear one more player talk like that, I might just lose my mind. Unfortunately, when you get a bad feeling in your gut about something, you're more likely than not to be right. My worst fears were confirmed, and more than half of the subsequent players began employing baby talk, wearing me down mentally and physically. By the time everyone was done and we were freed from the nightmarish photo shoot, both my monsters and I were completely drained.

"That totally did a number on me..."

"Mm..."

"Growl..."

"Chirp..."

Being the most chipper among us, Sakura took the lead for a

change. At first, I was afraid she might sulk due to being the only one who hadn't had her photo taken, but on the contrary, she seemed rather relieved. Perhaps that was only fair, seeing how worn out her siblings were.

"All right, *now* we can go fishi—Actually no, we can't," I paused, realizing that I didn't own a fishing rod yet. "Let's swing by Roqué's house first." Perhaps he'd be willing to lend me one, and besides, I felt like I ought to check up on him. I could always buy a fishing rod elsewhere if borrowing wasn't an option. Additionally, Roqué would know whether we could catch fish in the farm pond. If there were any other fishing spots in the village, he'd most likely be able to point us to them. It didn't take us very long to reach his house, and we were soon knocking on his front door.

"Hello? You home, Roqué?" I called out.

"Coming. Who is it?"

Good, he appeared to be home. After making the villagers sick with worry with that little stunt he and his friends had pulled, he'd probably concluded it was best to stay put for the time being.

"Oh, hey, Mister. What brings you here today?" Roqué greeted me.

"I wanted to see if you had a fishing rod. Also, I was curious to find out how you've been doing. Thank goodness you're home today. Thought you might've run away again—you had me worried for a second."

"Ugh, don't start on that again! I already got chewed out real hard."

Evidently, the villagers had given him a stern scolding.

"All the uncles are furious, and the aunties won't stop nagging me either! Even worse, I'm due for *another* lecture when my pops comes home!" Roqué shuddered. He seemed to be terrified of his father—the color had completely drained from his face in a highly non-NPC-like manner. Taking pity on him, I decided not to drag this out any further, hurriedly changing the subject.

"Uh-huh... Anyway, think you can spare me a fishing rod?"

"Hm? A fishing rod? Sure thing! Here ya go," Roqué replied, handing me a beginner's fishing tackle kit consisting of a fishing rod, creel, and beginner-friendly lures. I also spotted some beginner's paste bait, which had a slightly better chance of catching fish than beginner's lures. I was about to buy that from him too when Roqué stopped me, offering me something else instead.

"Here, you can have this too."

"Paste bait? This much?"

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 5★

Effect: Marginally improves the odds of catching freshwater fish.

Roqué had offered me some paste bait that he'd appeared to have made himself, which amounted to a total of ninety-nine pieces. Although they seemed pretty much on par with the beginner's paste bait, I was still immensely thankful for them. This way, I could save a bit of money and fish for a while without having to worry about running out of bait.

"Sure I can have all this?"

"Of course. Consider it my way of saying thanks for rescuing us!"

Well, I certainly saw no reason to turn him down. *Damn, talk about striking gold!* I couldn't wait to go fishing!

"Hey, Roqué. Know if I can catch any fish in that farm pond over there?"

"The farm pond? Yeah, sure can. Wouldn't say the fish there are worthwhile, though—you're much better off fishing in the river."

While he was probably right, I was keen on remaining within the confines of the village for now. Besides, the pond seemed a more suitable choice for a beginner like me.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. Think I'll check out the farm pond first, though."

"Good luck!"

I thanked the fisherman's apprentice for his help and set off for the farm pond. Noting that the black pillar in the distance had yet to complete its transformation, I reckoned I could relax a bit. A lazy afternoon spent fishing against the backdrop of an impending otherworldly disaster was another one of those surreal scenarios you could only experience in-game.

"This spot should do just fine."

I leaned against a tree beside the pond and dangled my fishing line, my monsters playing somewhere nearby.

"Guess I should start heading back soon..."

In two hours' time, I'd managed to catch a decent amount of fish from the pond. Although they were all the same fish, that was still better than nothing at all.

Name: Begini Crucian Carp

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 3★

Effect: Ingredient. Edible.

While the crucian carp were inferior in quality to begini dace, I

was pleased to discover that drying them yielded the same results as the latter; i.e., small dried fish. Just because they were lower in quality didn't mean they were utterly useless.

"...♪"

"Oh, hey. Thanks, Sakura."

"...♪"

Sakura, who had been watching me fish and keeping me company, offered me her hand as I made a move to get up. *Bless your kind, considerate soul!* Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same for her siblings. Those little rascals had caused such a racket that I'd lost count of the times they'd scared away the fish.

"Time to go, guys."

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp!"

Hearing my call, Olto and Rick ceased their game of tag and scurried back.

"Growl growl..."

"Come on now. There's always another time."

"Growl..."

Though Bear Bear had attempted to catch some fish with their magnificent claws, their efforts proved unsuccessful in the end. Clearly, Bear Bear hadn't a trace of hunting instincts left in them—not that I could say for certain, seeing as I'd asked them to fish on the other side of the pond for fear of them scaring away my quarry. Bear Bear plodded back to us, shoulders slumped. They looked so woebegone, I couldn't help but pity them.

"Don't look so disappointed. I'll take you fishing again, okay?"

"Growl?"

"I promise. Let's go on another fishing trip sometime."

"Growl."

I did my best to console Bear Bear as we headed back to the village square. When we arrived, I found Kokuten and the others had already returned from their reconnaissance trip.

"Yoo-hoo, Bear Bear! You too, Silver-Haired!" Marca trilled, quick as always to pick out Bear Bear from the crowd. To her, I was nothing but an afterthought. What else was new, though?

"How was the black pillar?" I asked.

"Terrifying. That being said, I wouldn't call it a pillar anymore," Marca replied, glancing in its direction. Likewise, I followed her gaze. She was right: now that I looked at it again, the pillar had clearly morphed into a human form.

"We went all the way to the foot of it to assess it. Turned out that thing was none other than Glasya-Labolas itself."

"Figured as much."

Alas, my suspicions had been confirmed. How had they held out against such a monstrous boss, though?

"I'm amazed you made it back in one piece. Or did you respawn?"

"Neither, actually. We haven't fought it yet."

The group had ventured as far as the foot of Glasya-Labolas, where they found some sort of force field trapping it in place.

"We found *this* in front of it," Marca added, showing me the video she'd filmed. The clip showed an hourglass filled with steadily cascading black sand. The device was white in color, adorned with gold embellishments that gave it a mysterious and resplendent appearance. Judging by the players nearby, it seemed pretty large—at least the size of an oil drum, I figured. The peculiar object was suspended in midair.

"You said this thing was in front of the force field surrounding Glasya-Labolas?"

"Exactly. I'm guessing that once all the sand has fallen to the bottom, the boss will be set free."

According to Marca and the others' calculations, the sand would probably finish falling by noon the following day.

"Shit... Who's gonna fight it? Obviously, Kokuten's party is a given, right?"

"More like everyone, actually. Glasya-Labolas is a raid boss."

Apparently, they had managed to confirm its life meter and red enemy marker even before the battle had begun. This was in line with the characteristics of a raid boss.

"Anyway, we're having a strategy meeting in a bit. First, we'll discuss how best to distribute Sukegawa's Guardian Beast equipment before talking military tactics."

"I see. Good luck."

"Excuse me?! You're coming too!"

"In case you've forgotten, I'm no use when it comes to fighting. I don't have a right to participate," I objected, hoping that Marca would drop the subject. However...

"If you, *the number one contributor to this server*, doesn't have the right, then who does?!"

Shoot, I'd totally forgotten about that rank! *Fine then*. I supposed it wouldn't hurt to show up, as tedious as it sounded...

"Okay. I'll be there," I answered reluctantly.

"Yay!"

Marca seemed overjoyed, but I was pretty sure that was only because she was excited to spend more time with Bear Bear. That being said, I'd already given my assent; there was no backing out now. Marca then led me to the guild's assembly room, which the guild had been glad to lend to us thanks to Kokuten and Siegfried's

contributions. According to Marca, the countless tasks they'd completed over the past few days had probably done wonders for their favorability scores. Now that she mentioned it, the receptionist did seem somewhat friendlier now than she had at the start of the event.

"Let us now commence the very first Glasya-Labolas Strategy Meeting," Kokuten announced, having had the role of chairperson forced upon him. A polite round of applause broke out.

There were around ten of us in the assembly room: Kokuten, who was virtually the strongest among us and revered as such by everyone else. Siegfried, the third-highest contributing player who also led the clique that wished to prioritize our server rank. Marca, who'd played a major part in the boss battle and rose to fame during this event. Sukegawa, who, in addition to being the fifth-highest contributing player and top blacksmith, had crafted Guardian Beast weapons. There were also high-ranking party leaders and players known for their excellent fighting and crafting skills. And then there was little old me. For some reason, I was given the seat of honor, right next to Kokuten. Siegfried occupied the other side. Seriously, why wasn't anyone complaining?! If they wanted me out, now was their chance! Sadly, not a single soul offered to kick me out. Far from that, the crowd gave me the best seat in the room once I'd introduced myself, much to my confusion. And I'd totally meant to hide away in a corner of the room at first...

"Please take a look at this screenshot," Kokuten motioned to the group. He seemed used to these types of situations, steering the conversation with ease. He then explained about the hourglass placed in front of Glasya-Labolas and the estimated time and date for when the sand inside would finish falling, judging from how much was left. After that, the discussion turned to whether we ought to take our chances and go all out from the get-go, or fight the demon a few times first to figure out its attack patterns as we did with regular bosses. Since tomorrow was Day Six of the event, some suggested that we take our chances. Eventually, however, we settled on using the following day to determine the boss's patterns before having the final showdown the day after tomorrow.

While we were at it, we also discussed our preparations for battle. The discussion was surprisingly brief, and it was decided that Sukegawa's Guardian Beast weapons were to be distributed to a party that specialized in fighting. Since Kokuten and Marca's parties, who were responsible for the ingots used in the weapons, had declined them, stating that they already had titles, the other players had probably found it difficult to raise any objections. I'd also declined the weapons, "declined" being in air quotes. In my case, there was no point in me having them, plus I feared the other players would

retaliate in jealousy, so I'd forced them back upon Sukegawa. *I ain't no saint, please, don't look at me with such reverence!*

Our next topic was how to go about fighting Glasya-Labolas. Obviously, none of us had ever fought Glasya-Labolas itself, but there was no denying the similarities it shared with the mid-level bosses we'd encountered pre-transformation. Evidently, the second boss Kokuten's party had faced looked exactly the same. Taking all that into account, we figured it might be possible to determine its attacks. We began writing down the apostles' attack patterns, searching for a common thread. In the end, the only commonalities we found were their mid-battle transformation once their HP was reduced in half and AoE attack that unleashed black mist. Since the two apostles had each transformed into a dog and a cat, we assumed that Glasya-Labolas would also take on a beast-like second form, but that was the extent of our analysis. We appeared to have no choice but to arm ourselves with plenty of recovery options and deal with each problem as it arose.

Lastly, we discussed different types of aid. For some reason, all eyes were on me. As it happened, the pork and vegetable miso soup I'd served the other day was to blame. Those that had been present asked me if it was possible to provide food that granted additional buffs to respawners and those participating in the fight.

"I have a few recipes that give you buffs, so it's not impossible, but... Hang on, there's gotta be nearly *three hundred* players on this server, right? I don't have nearly enough ingredients for everyone," I replied.

"So you're saying it's possible *if* you have the ingredients?" someone asked.

"That, and a few extra pairs of hands. I don't have enough time or MP to handle that much cooking on my own."

Hearing my response, the crowd began discussing if there were any cooks among them. Aside from the dabblers with Cooking skills who'd helped me during the previous cookout, there appeared to be a few players who specialized in cooking. I was sure their skill levels were far higher than mine, not to mention their actual culinary skills. If that were the case, perhaps I could leave the heavy lifting to them and take on a lesser support role instead. While I wasn't averse to cooking, I didn't want to be the one in charge of dishing out instructions. Being too forthright seemed like it could raise a few eyebrows, so I resorted to employing a more diplomatic approach, saying that I'd be happy if someone more skilled at cooking could take charge of the situation.

"...Sure you're okay with that?"

"Honestly, I'd love it if someone else could do it."

"But that would mean you'd have to share your recipe with other

people, Silver-Haired.”

Oh, so *that’s* what you meant. That didn’t bother me in the least. It wasn’t like my dishes were worth keeping under lock and key in the first place. I’d already shared my miso soup with a ton of people; likewise, word of the other dishes was bound to get out soon. After all, my recipes were based on what you would make in real life. Anyone who cooked regularly could come up with these recipes as long as they had the right ingredients. While obtaining condiments could be tricky, even that was only a matter of time, seeing as you could buy them in this village.

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Wow. Wouldn’t expect any less from Silver-Haired.”

“Huh?”

For some reason, they seemed mighty impressed. Was it that weird to share my recipes with other people? Well, I guessed it didn’t matter if it helped my reputation.

“Basically, what you’re saying is that as long as we have enough ingredients, we can make all sorts of stuff. Correct?”

“Basically, yeah.”

My words caused a commotion among the crowd. While part of the excitement probably stemmed from their anticipation of trying food with buffs, most people simply seemed stoked to eat tasty food. I was promptly bombarded with questions about what sort of dishes I could make, and cheers erupted each time I rattled off the name of a dish. At this rate, I would most likely be cooking nonstop all of tomorrow and the day after. Considering we were in the final stretch, I supposed I had no choice but to tough it out.

“Other than that, we’ve got to gather ingredients for potions and crafting weapons.”

“Things are gonna get super busy around here!”

I wrote out a list of things I needed and handed it to Kokuten. To tell the truth, I’d actually been experimenting with making other dishes besides miso soup and pizza these past few days, so I included the ingredients for those foods as well. While our topmost priority was pork and vegetable miso soup, the more dishes we could make, the better our chances were at winning. It was decided that we’d get to work recruiting volunteers and gathering ingredients immediately.

“I’d appreciate it if you could come along with us when we ask people for help with ingredients...” said Kokuten.

“You want *my* help?”

“Well, your monsters, to be precise.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

That was a pretty harmless request. In fact, I didn’t mind letting other people take screenshots of my monsters if it meant gaining their

cooperation. Not that I knew how many players would actually appreciate that offer, but it was the least I could do. I proceeded to ask around in the square, making my proposal as I went. *The result? Well...*

“Be more than happy to join!”

“All right! Ain’t gonna miss this opportunity this time!”

“Woo-hoo!”

A huge crowd of people had formed around us, every single one of them staring at my monsters hungrily through bloodshot eyes. Frankly, I was a bit put off by the response. There appeared to be many players who had been absent from the village last time, consequently missing out on the chance to fight the Guardian Bear, as well as those who’d failed to have a go at the beast due to the apostle being defeated before their turn. Regardless, the people who had been able to take a screenshot had gone around flaunting their victories, making those who’d missed out green with envy.

“Woooooo!”

“Time to go hunting!”

“I’m gonna buy out every store!”

“Let’s DO this!”

Although I felt like we could expect great results from them, surely they needn’t be *that* excited? I sincerely hoped they wouldn’t go berserk or anything. Moreover, I had more pressing concerns to worry about.

“Our next photo shoot’s gonna be even more tiring.”

“Mmm...”

“C-C’mon, don’t look at me like that.”

“Growl...”

“Seriously, where’d you guys learn to glare like that? It’s not like I had a choice. I just wanted a way to motivate everyone!”

“Chirp...”

“Man, must be nice being so popular.”

“...”

“N-Not you too, Sakura! I’m sorry, okay?!”

It took me well over an hour to get back in my monsters’ good graces. The way things were going, it looked like I’d have to come up with a way to cheer them up after the photo shoot...

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 32

“GRAWRRRR!”

“Damn it! Glasya-Labolas has invaded the village...!”

“How’s the villagers’ evacuation process going?”

“We’re moving them to safety now! But those weird black devils that have been spawning all over the place have been getting in the

way!”

“Things definitely aren’t looking good... What about the players who left the village?”

“I tried talking to them, but they told me to stick it where the sun don’t shine.”

“Ugh, for Pete’s sake! What is *wrong* with all these selfish bastards...? It’s *their* fault for defeating the guardian beasts!”

“Who cares about that?! Anyway, we’ve gotta do something about those mob devils first before Glasya-Labolas!”

“Okay, fine! Still, I don’t think it’s a good idea to—”

“Leave that big one to us.”

“Huh? Wh-Who are you?”

“I’m Clans the lumberjack. This surly old geezer here is Cacal the hunter. It ain’t right for us to flee when brave travelers like you are staying to fight for our village! We’ll fight too!”

“Agreed.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“Sure we ought to leave it to the NPCs? What if they die? We don’t even know how strong they are... I mean, a lumberjack and a hunter...?”

“What other choice do we have, though?! Whatever buys us some time!”

“I-I mean, yeah, but...”

“Let’s go! Hiyah! Prepare to be axed!”

“What in the world?! That dude is *sick*! Wh-What’s up with that ax, anyway? In the first place, lumberjacks aren’t fighters, are they? Or did I miss something?”

“Nuh-uh, it’s news to me too! Never knew lumberjacks could be *that* powerful! Huh? The hell is *that*?! There’s a huge wound on Glasya-Labolas’s leg...!”

“Trusty arrow, heed my command and pierce that beast.”

“Whoa! Did you see that?! Glasya-Labolas’s HP just plummeted!”

“That’s so cool! Hunters are freaking awesome! I’m so gonna work on my bow and arrow skills when I get back!”

“Ha ha ha! We’ll handle this!”

“Take care of the villagers.”

“G-Got it!”

“W-Will do!”

A Certain Group of Players in Server No. 17

“Look! Isn’t that the kid we’re looking for?”

“You’re right, it is! Well done, Akari!”

“Hi, little girl. Are you Lucca, by any chance?”

“And who are you, miss?”

“I’m Akari, an adventurer. We’ve come to rescue you. Are you all right? You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“I’m okay!”

“Everyone’s been worried about you. Come with us, and we’ll make sure you get out of here safely.”

“Okay.”

“Why didn’t you escape with everyone else, though?”

“...I was worried about the seeds... If they burn, I’m sure mom and dad will be sad.”

“I see. You tried to protect your shop’s goods for your parents. What a brave little girl you are.”

“Akari! The demons are coming!”

“Got it! All right, time to go, Lucca!”

“Okay.”

“Good, we got the kid! Now, let’s get the hell outta this village! If we don’t hurry, the fire will swallow us up!”

“We seem pretty close to defeating Glasya-Labolas, don’t we?”

“Yep, thanks to the villagers’ help. We owe it all to you for being on good terms with them! No wonder you’re one of the three famed titleholders—they don’t call you the Ruby Red Explorer for nothing!”

“Aw shucks. Being lumped with them doesn’t quite sit right with me, though... I’m not as charismatic as those other two.”

“You think? You shouldn’t sell yourself short, you know.”

“No, seriously. Like, come on, we’re talking about the *Purple-Haired Adventurer* and *Silver-Haired Pioneer*.”



“Ha ha. You’re right, they’re both quite the character!”

“Obviously, I don’t intend to be overshadowed, but I’m definitely not in the same league as them.”

“Hey, you never know. They might feel the same way about you.”

“Oh, puh-lease! Not in a million years.”

“You really think so? Well, in any event, I’m rooting for you!”

“Thank you, that means a lot. For now, my goal is just to rank higher than Silver-Haired—Yuto, that is—and Siegfried in this event!”

“Attagirl! But... You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if Silver-Haired’s server managed to save the village without any collateral damage.”

“Aha ha ha... It’s scary how I can actually see that happening.”

“Right? I mean, I’m pretty sure it’s impossible, but he *might* just be able to pull it off.”

Chapter Six: Reinforcements and a Fight to the Death

“Wow...” I gasped at the staggering view before my eyes.

“Wow, indeed. Wasn’t expecting this much miso.”

“We also have an abundance of fruits.”

“Let’s see... We’ve got purple persimmons, green peaches, and white pears.”

“Lots of players have also provided us with meat other than Attack Boar meat.”

A team of players with Cooking skills went through the donated ingredients before me, ticking off each item as they did. The leader of the group was a woman named Fuka, who, at over level 30, had the highest Cooking skill level on this server. Fuka was a cook through and through; she had already undergone a class change and advanced to a special secondary job titled Chef. Amelia was another one of the members present. Being a Tamer like me, Cooking had been one of her starting skills, which she appeared to have spent a significant amount of time honing.

Boy, was this a spectacle, though—and I meant that in every sense of the word. The ingredients we had gathered covered nearly every inch of the inn’s cafeteria table. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve assumed some kind of food commercial shoot or cooking competition was about to take place. The innkeeper had been more than happy to lend this space to us, along with their kitchen; yet again being on good terms with the villagers had paid off.

It was currently one in the afternoon on Day Six of the event. At noon on the dot, I had received the now-routine daily report. This time, I kept my review of it to the bare minimum; there weren’t many notable changes anyway. Our server was still in first place, and I had maintained my number one spot in the server contribution rankings. My individual rank had dipped to 95th place, but frankly, that was the least of my worries. Right now, we had to prepare a wide array of dishes for our impending battle, which was slated for the following morning. Before that, however, I needed to do a few trial runs and bring everyone up to speed. Now that we had enough ingredients, it was time for some cooking lessons.

“Hmm... Guess we should start with the pork and vegetable miso soup.”

I decided to teach the other chefs how to cook this dish first, especially since Kokuten and the others had asked us to prioritize it, given its sped-up HP auto-recovery rate and Endurance and Sanity boosts.

“I’ve already given you guys the recipe, but I’ll walk you through it once just so everything’s clear.”

“Thanks, Silver-Haired!”

“First, start by drying some fish, which will give you an item called dried fish.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then, dry some sirishrooms...” I continued, keenly aware of how the crowd was watching my every movement like hawks. Who did I think I was, lecturing players whose skills were far superior to mine like some pompous dick? *If anything, they should be the ones teaching me!* In their defense, though, they *had* already taught me a wide variety of recipes in exchange for mine. Overall, there had been more positives than negatives. Still, that didn’t make this situation any less awkward.

“And done. Glad I could maintain a seven-star rating.”

Considering my skill level, that wasn’t bad at all. The addition of dried sirishrooms, along with the small dried fish, had probably done the trick.

“Can I try some? I’m dying to find out how it tastes,” one of the players piped up.

“Sure, go ahead,” I replied.

“Hey, no fair! Me too!”

“Me three! Taste is everything!”

“Absolutely. No dish is complete without a taste test.”

Everyone began fighting to get first dibs on my miso soup. Since people were going to eat this for the buffs, I didn’t think the taste mattered that much as long as it was edible. Most likely, they had simply succumbed to the enticing smell. *Oh well. Might as well join them.*

“Hm, not bad.”

While the soup tasted perfectly fine, its appearance was as disturbing as ever. The garish colors of the ultramarine eggplants and blue carrots never failed to make me lose my appetite. I recalled a weight-loss hack in real life that used blue furikake rice seasoning that tricked you into eating less by making the food less appealing. In any case, buffs were our main priority; whether it looked good or not was of secondary importance.

“Next up, we’ll be making some pizza,” I informed the group.

“Pizza! Hell yeah!”

“That’s literally my favorite food.”

We'd actually managed to acquire a lot more cheese than I'd bargained for. As it turned out, there was no limit on the amount of cheese you could buy from Aval the dairy farmer, provided that you fulfilled his requests. Quite a few players had visited Aval; as such, despite each person only making one trip, we had more than enough cheese to make pizza. Frankly, I was more concerned about our supply of white tomatoes, the star ingredient in our pizza sauce and toppings. I really hoped we'd have enough to go around. For starters, I decided to set about making the most basic type of pizza. Once the white tomato sauce was ready, I spread a dollop on the pizza before topping it with sliced white tomatoes, ultramarine eggplants, basilil, cheese, and olive oil. One of the cooks who had been studying me in silence suddenly blurted out a question.

"Hey, Silver-Haired, why're you putting *weeds* on the pizza?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, I was wondering about that too," another person chimed in. *Right*. It seemed like these people didn't know about the skill Plant Knowledge yet. That being said, I was sure Tagosack had posted about it in the forums by now, not to mention there were those herb cultivation kits that had been discovered in Zone Five recently. Anyone could obtain this skill by using said kits, given that the requirement for learning it was growing and harvesting weeds of your own accord. I'd also heard that they made popular souvenirs, so I wouldn't be surprised if there were hordes of people who'd already obtained the skill. All things considered, Plant Knowledge was guaranteed to become a publicly known fact sooner rather than later. I didn't see any problems with divulging what I knew now and to be honest, I was tired of coming up with excuses or trying to brush off their questions at this point. Having made up my mind, I clued the crowd in on the existence of this skill, and explained how it allowed you to discern herbs from regular weeds.

"As for how to obtain it, you can look up the details on your own."

"Wow, who knew there was such a skill?!"

"Hurrah! Herbs!"

Judging by how excited they were, I was sure they'd all obtain the skill in no time. Fuka, our top chef, seemed particularly overjoyed. To my surprise, she turned out to be a huge fan of my herbal tea and had apparently been attempting to recreate it with the use of medicinal herbs.

"I had no idea your tea was made from weeds! Now that I know, I'm gonna try making it myself! Thanks so much, Silver-Haired! I'll be sure to repay you for this!" she exclaimed.

“Sure, looking forward to it.”

“You betcha!”

Feel free to spread the word online: that way, I can finally escape from this herbal-tea-making hellhole. Since I was the only one selling herbal tea leaves at the moment, I had been forced into mass-producing them for other people as well. Truthfully, however, I was getting sick of this life, and was dying to call it quits.

After that, we tested a few different recipes, with slight variations in the toppings and sauce. While I preferred my pizza plain and simple, the other cooks seemed to be in the mood for a more American-style pizza, loaded with toppings. Some people were relatively vanilla, simply opting to jazz up the sauce or use meat or fish in lieu of other ingredients. Others were more adventurous: Amelia, for example, had come up with the idea of dessert pizza using honey and fruits. Women’s ingenuity never failed to impress me—I hadn’t considered pizza could be sweet. Unfortunately, changing the ingredients resulted in different effects, and most of the buffs weren’t worth mass-producing. This wasn’t to say that the buffs *weren’t* useful—there were plenty of cases where the ability to dispel poison and recover HP would come in handy—it was just that when going up against a raid boss, it was smarter to prioritize buffs that helped reduce the cost of your MP.

In the end, the only pizza that made the cut was Fuka’s teriyaki pizza. The pizza had a sweet and salty teriyaki sauce base, made by combining honey and soy sauce, topped with rabbit meat, ultramarine eggplants, and cabbage. Being more of a Margherita guy myself, teriyaki pizza hadn’t crossed my mind at all. I really had to take my hat off to her.

Name: Teriyaki Pizza (One Slice)

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 13%. Boosts incantation cast speed for two hours.

Although this meant we’d have to dip into our limited supply of soy sauce, we probably wouldn’t have to make too many slices, seeing as Mages would be the only ones eating them. I then proceeded to demonstrate several more recipes I’d tested over the past few days, such as fruit juice, hoto—which was a kind of flat udon noodle soup with vegetables—cabbage rolls, and ratatouille. We had to choose which foods to mass-produce carefully, as we didn’t want to run the risk of running out of ingredients. Ultimately, we settled on making cabbage rolls, which increased your max HP, and mixed fruit juice, which didn’t have any ingredients in common with the other recipes.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Fuka.”

“Sure thing! You can count on me! Let’s do our best, everyone!”

“Heck yeah!” the crowd crowed in unison. All the good food really seemed to have gotten everyone pumped up. Taking the time to taste everything had definitely been worth it.

“Okay, I’m gonna split you guys into teams now. The groups will be Team Miso Soup, Team Pizza, Team Cabbage Rolls, and Team Juice,” I announced.

“All right! It’s not every day we get to cook this many dishes at once! I’m itching to show y’all what I can do!”

“This is my chance to gain XP and raise my skill level!”

I had assigned myself to Team Miso Soup. *Well, time to roll up my sleeves and get to work.* As tedious as this was, I couldn’t afford to slack off, not when everyone else was working so hard.

It was now six in the morning on the seventh day of the event: the time that our combat troops were scheduled to set off for the fight with Glasya-Labolas. We had already distributed the food we’d prepared, which had been carefully stored away in everyone’s inventories. The plan was to eat the food right before the showdown. Out of the three hundred players on our server, roughly 250 people had joined the combat troops. The remaining fifty or so of us, myself included, were to aid those fighting on the front lines.

At first, there had been a lot of disagreement over how to divide the teams. Not everyone was inclined to help Kokuten and Siegfried, as some parties had thus far made it through the event solely on their own. To them, cooperating with us must have been akin to surrendering to the enemy and giving up their freedoms. As a result, they had initially declined to help us. In the end, however, almost everyone agreed to join our cause, as they probably came to the conclusion that there was no way they’d be able to win on their own against a raid boss. As reluctant as they were, they were aware of the benefits of working together, which would allow them to earn a few points. They finally caved and agreed to help, albeit rather condescendingly. For the most part, though, they kept in step with the rest of the group and also seemed willing to participate in Kokuten’s proposed plan. Having said that, there was bound to be chaos on the battlefield. I was sure there were more than a few players who would be determined to get ahead of everyone else and prioritize their own interests when push came to shove.

Fortunately, our group had very little to do with the aforementioned drama, as the combat troops mostly consisted of fighter types, none of whom had been assigned to the support team. Since we crafter types were pretty much incapable of doing anything

on our own, most of us had aligned ourselves with the key players of this server from the outset. As behind-the-scenes players, our main job was to help heal the troops who had respawned from the raid boss battle. The blacksmithing team was in charge of repairing broken gear, while the pharmaceuticals team was tasked with replenishing potions. The cooking team that I belonged to was in charge of handing out new food, as dying canceled out the effects of the buffs. There was no time to rest or slack off, lest supplies run dry.

Additionally, we also had some explaining to do to the villagers who had spotted Glasya-Labolas. For some reason, I was tasked with this responsibility. Granted, I supposed I *was* the most obvious choice, considering I was the number one contributor to this server as well as the person closest to the villagers.

Upon their departure, many players said goodbye to my monsters, Marca included.

“Buh-bye, Bear Bear! See you later!” Marca waved cheerfully.

“Growl!”

“I’ll do my best, Olto!”

“Mm-mm.”

“Cheer for me, Rick!”

“Chirp!”

“A-As long as you have my back, I’m willing to fight for a hundred years if need be, Sakura!”

“...♪”

Wh-Who says I feel left out?! Nuh-uh, it doesn’t suck at all that no one bothered to say anything to me!

“Mm-mm.”

“Growl growl.”

“Y-You don’t have to pat me on the knee like that. No need to feel sorry for me...”

As Olto and Bear Bear attempted to cheer me up, Kokuten and Siegfried approached us.

“We’ll be off now, Silver-Haired,” Kokuten said somberly.

“We’re counting on your support, Yuto!” Siegfried patted my shoulder.

“Wah! At last, someone who notices me!” I wailed.

“Wh-What’s the matter?”

“Are you all right?”

Whoops. I shouldn’t have yelled so loud.

“Sorry, it’s nothing,” I replied, waving off their concerned looks.

“Guess it’s time for the final showdown, huh?”

“Indeed. You can count on us.” Siegfried nodded reassuringly.

“We’ll do our best,” Kokuten added.

“Good luck.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

“...!”

As I waved goodbye to everyone, my companions offered their customary salute to the troops. Without my noticing, Rick, Olto, Bear Bear, and Sakura had formed a neat line in order of shortest to tallest. Those little munchkins sure knew how to best present themselves. Immediately, squeals erupted from the crowd. The sight of my monsters saluting appeared to have a much more devastating effect than I thought; quite a few people came to a standstill and stared at us with bloodshot eyes. Some people even backpedaled, causing the entire group to fall into disarray. *Oh wow. Sorry, guys.* I decided to make a hasty retreat with my companions, ignoring the monster lovers’ desperate pleas for us to stay. After Kokuten and Siegfried did their best to pacify the troops, they finally set off on their journey. I offered the two a silent apology for breaking the group’s formation that they had worked so hard on. I certainly hadn’t expected things to get this out of hand.

“GRAAAWWRRRRRRRR!”

“Damn, that was loud!”

“Mm-mm.”

An hour after our troops had departed, an absolutely earsplitting roar, the loudest to date, reverberated throughout the village. At this point, the word “roar” no longer seemed fitting—the noise level was comparable to a thunderbolt or an explosion. Right after Glasya-Labolas unleashed its terrifying bellow, we saw its colossal obsidian body beginning to move, slowly. It looked like the final battle had begun at last. That roar must have been a sign that the archdemon had been freed from its shackles.

“Can’t believe that thing’s actually moving. I mean, look at its *size*.”

While the demon’s movements were still rather stiff, it was nevertheless a colossal threat, given that it was over twenty meters tall. I had nothing but mad respect for the players fighting that giant. Within seconds, I saw numerous spells flying at the archdemon. The troops had started fighting according to the plan: the Mages cast spells from a distance, while the remaining soldiers attacked the demon from the ground and probed it for weak spots. Truthfully, that was pretty much the extent of what they could do. At the same time, they also had to analyze its attack patterns and be careful to minimize the damage.

Furthermore, we also had to anticipate a scenario where Glasya-

Labolas either made it all the way to the village or one of the sacred trees. If that were to happen, we'd have an even bigger disaster upon us. No doubt it would result in the loss of event points as well. As a matter of fact, the demon had been on the move ever since its seal had broken, albeit sluggishly. I wasn't entirely certain where it was headed just yet, but to me, it looked as though it was moving towards the village. All I could do was hope that the combat troops could put a stop to it.

"Get ready, everyone. There's no telling when someone will respawn now that the fight's begun."

"Mmm."

"I'm counting on you guys too, okay?"

"Growl!"

"Chirp!"

"...♪"

At the very least, my companions would probably be able to offer some comfort to the players who'd died. After all, who wouldn't be stoked to receive a potion from a cute monster?

"Yo! Go restock the potions table, will ya?!"

"Miso soup's over here!"

"It'll be faster to just make you a new sword than fix this one!"

One hour had passed since the start of the final boss raid battle. In the meantime, the village square had transformed into a war zone. The first group of respawners had returned thirty minutes ago; since then, countless players had joined their ranks. By now, the death toll had to be greater than forty. While many players had already set out for round two, roughly twenty people still remained in the village. At the moment, I was busy guiding a fresh round of respawners to some rush mats we had laid out in the square. Some of them were visibly shaken, either from fear or shock, while others were simply mentally drained from the prolonged fight. I motioned for them to sit down and regain whatever strength they could.

"You okay?" I asked one of the players, urging them to drink a glass of water I had filled for them.

"Y-Yeah..." they muttered. Judging by how the color had completely drained from their face, they had probably met a grisly death. Apparently, being trampled on by Glasya-Labolas was just the beginning. One of the worst deaths I'd heard so far was being picked up and swallowed whole. Thankfully, there was no chewing involved, but being eaten alive nevertheless had to be a traumatizing experience. Another player had told me that instead of being swallowed, they'd been flung aside like a rag doll. Basically, it was the equivalent of bungee jumping from a great height without a cord.

That had to be terrifying, regardless of whether you were afraid of heights. Neither sounded like a pleasant way to kick the bucket; as such, I vowed to support the combat troops to the best of my ability. From what I heard, however, the situation on the battlefield was a lot more dire than I would have imagined.

“Glasya-Labolas has been relentless in its attacks. As it stands, we haven’t been able to get close to it at all,” one of the players who had respawned sighed heavily.

“Guess that makes magic or archery your main source of damage then?”

“Not necessarily. Those with Guardian Beast weapons have also been launching simultaneous attacks after a particularly powerful move. We slip up, though, and we get paralyzed.”

“No wonder the pharmaceuticals team has been so frazzled...”

The players who had been responsible for analyzing the archdemon’s patterns hadn’t mentioned anything about status ailments. Perhaps its behavior had changed due to the surge of players. As far as I could remember, we’d made very few anti-paralysis potions, due to a lack of ingredients. Perhaps I ought to help the pharmaceuticals team as well, given that I possessed concocting skills. The cooking team had already started preparing additional dishes, but I was sure it wouldn’t make much difference if they were one member short.

“Hey, Fuka. I’m thinking of helping out the pharmaceuticals team.”

“Sure thing. That might be for the best. They do seem awfully flustered.”

“Right then, I’ll be gone for a bit. Just holler if you need anything, ’kay?”

“Okay. Catch you later.”

“Hold up, Silver-Haired!” Amelia butted in just as I was about to leave.

“What is it, Amelia?”

“Leave Olto behind!”

“...Bye.”

“Aww, wait up!”

Jeez. My monsters were much too popular for their own good.

“Um, hi. I’ve come to help,” I tentatively announced.

“Huh? *Silver-Haired*? Don’t you have cooking to do?” A handsome blond male elf, who was the leader of the pharmaceuticals team, greeted me.

“It’s okay, they can manage without me. I was more worried about you guys. I heard you’ve been struggling.”

“Thanks, appreciate the help! What’s your Concoct level?”

“Seventeen.”

“Right...”

“Is that too low?”

“Oh no, hardly! The only thing is, we’re making paralysis-resistance potions in addition to anti-paralysis potions. You need a skill level of 20 to make the intermediary ingredient.”

Upon further questioning, I learned that alongside anti-paralysis potions, the team was also concocting tonics that increased your resistance to paralysis, hence the name. Clearly, I would be making the former, seeing as the latter was beyond my ability.

“You join that team, Silver-Haired. Just ask the leader at the desk for details,” the blond elf instructed.

“Roger.”

As expected, I was asked to join the anti-paralysis potions team. After I had the leader teach me the recipe, it was simply a matter of concocting with the ingredients laid out in front of me. Although the first few attempts resulted in low-quality potions, my latter attempts were more successful once I got the hang of things.

For once, my monsters were quiet, seemingly aware of how tense the atmosphere was. That being said, they were incapable of staying put, and had wandered off somewhere else before long. I had caught a glimpse of Olto mingling with the cooking team a few minutes prior. That didn’t surprise me, seeing that they were the most likely to make a fuss over him. Bear Bear was standing in front of a woman taking a break, who appeared to be a fan of them. As long as Bear Bear was making themselves useful, I didn’t see the harm in it. Rick was napping in a tree right beside the rush mat that the pharmaceuticals team was working on. Glancing up, I could see only his fluffy tail hanging over one of the branches. He wasn’t going to fall now, was he? If he accidentally fell inside one of our concoctions, it would take more than a simple apology to make up for it. In fact, my only choice might be seppuku at that point. *So please, stay put and don’t do anything stupid.*

Sakura alone had stayed by my side, watching over me from behind. *You’re the only one who has my back, Sakura!* Or perhaps it was merely in her nature as a tree nymph to remain in one spot. Every now and then, I saw her assisting other players or waving at people who made eye contact with her. The pharmaceuticals team was over the moon. The anti-paralysis potions team mainly consisted of male players; Sakura’s presence boosted their motivation tenfold.

“I-I gotta impress Sakura!”

“You’re such a doll, Sakura.”

“This is the first time I’ve hung out with a girl since starting this game!”

A girl...? You do realize she’s a monster, right? I mean, sure, she was

mighty cute, but still... *I feel like you should have higher standards, dude.* Oh well, whatever floats your boat, I guess. While I was taken aback by how excited the other players were, Sakura gazed up at me curiously.

“...?”

“Whoops, got distracted there for a bit. Focus, Yuto, focus.”

“...♪”

Basically, what I learned from all this was that my beloved Sakura was cute AF.

After thirty minutes of potion-making, Glasya-Labolas unleashed another earth-shattering roar, sending ripples through the air.

“GRAAAWWRRRRRRRR!”

“Whoa!”

I thought I’d gotten used to it by now, but I was still caught off guard. The timing was also unfortunate, as I’d been in the middle of concocting. I yelped instinctively, having almost dropped my ingredients. Meanwhile, there appeared to be some sort of development in the event, if the commotion around me was anything to go by.

“Wh-What’s going on?”

However, I was currently unable to take my eyes or hands off the mortar before me. Even as screams issued nearby, I forced myself to remain calm and continued concocting my potion.

“D-Done!”

Unfortunately, my panic had led to a slight loss in quality, although judging by the situation, now didn’t seem like the time for self-reflection.

“Anyway, what happened?” I asked hastily, not understanding what was going on.

“...! ...!”

In response, Sakura slapped my back several times before tugging on my sleeve repeatedly. I followed the direction of her gaze and yelled, utterly flabbergasted by what I saw.

“WHAT?!”

To my dismay, Glasya-Labolas was right near the village. But it’d barely moved from its starting point just a few moments ago!

“When did it get here?!”

Though it was still more than a stone’s throw away from us, compared to where it had been at the start of the battle, it felt dangerously close.

“Hey, what the hell happened?!”

“Silver-Haired! Where are you?”

“That you, Fuka? Tell me, what happened?”

“Glasya-Labolas *teleported* here, that’s what! I saw it with my own two eyes!”

Evidently, the combat troops had succeeded in halving the archdemon's HP, which had led to the next development in the event.

"Worse still, it's getting closer to the village."

"Exactly! The way things are, we might have to take part in the fight too."

As a matter of fact, Glasya-Labolas had been advancing towards us even before it teleported. However, whenever the troops began attacking it, it had stopped in its tracks to deal with the ambush. Once the players withdrew to regroup, the demon resumed its march towards the village.

"Basically, you're saying we're screwed unless we launch an attack and try to stall it?"

"That's right. At the very least, we have to prevent it from reaching the village. It's extremely likely that we'll have to stall it, try to buy some time until the combat troops return."

"Got it. Definitely wouldn't wanna fail the event after coming this far."

"We leave in five minutes. Just to be safe, we're planning on leaving about ten people behind. We'd really like you to join the fighting side, though."

"No problem. Makes sense since I'm a Tamer."

"Thanks."

Despite not being built for battle, my monsters were still somewhat better than your average crafter type with zero fighting abilities. *Very well. So be it.*

"All right, everyone! Gather 'round!"

"...♪"

"Mm-mm!"

The others came rushing back as soon as Sakura and I called for them. Truthfully, our fight with Glasya-Labolas was looking bleak. If only my monsters could eat some pork and vegetable miso soup... Just to gauge their reaction, I took one bowl out of my inventory and showed it to them.

"Yea or nay?"

"Mmm..."

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl growl."

I figured there was no point asking Sakura, seeing as she didn't require sustenance, but the others also seemed incapable of eating miso soup. While I wasn't sure if they couldn't or simply didn't want to eat it, the shaking of their heads meant this was obviously a no. There was nothing left to do but to go. I motioned everyone to follow me and headed to the entrance of the square where we were supposed to meet up.

Many players were already gathered at our meeting place. Unfortunately, the sight was far from reassuring. To begin with, none of us were fighters. That was to be expected, given that every single person here was a bona fide crafter; we definitely didn't give the impression that we'd be useful in combat. People seemed well aware of this fact, glancing around nervously at each other. Obviously, I was just as worried as them. I hardly imagined we stood a chance against the likes of Glasya-Labolas, no matter how many of us wimps banded together. Game or not, people were still prone to fear in the face of such a hyperrealistic scenario. We were all the more nervous thanks to the countless horror stories we'd heard from the people who had respawned.

In the midst of the crowd were Fuka and the other leaders of the support team. From the looks of it, the other players had seemingly pressured them into leading the fighting team as well. Their expressions were gloomy as they discussed our strategy. *Thank you for your sacrifice, oh brave ones.* Regardless, they were unable to come up with a decent plan, what with our fighting capabilities being so abysmal.

"Got a minute, Silver-Haired?" Fuka called me.

"What's up?"

"Well, we sort of came up with a plan..."

The plan they had come up with entailed attacking Glasya-Labolas in small groups, thereby reducing our chances of being wiped out too quickly. Rather than prioritizing damage dealing, the goal was to buy as much time as possible for the combat troops. Given that Glasya-Labolas stopped advancing during a fight, that didn't seem like a bad idea. In any case, we had no hopes of winning against the archdemon. Everyone was prepared to die anyway, so I was sure they'd be willing to accept what was essentially a suicide mission.

"Seems like our only option."

"You think so too, Silver-Haired?"

"Yeah."

"Cool, let's go with that then, now that we've gotten Silver-Haired's blessing."

"Fine by me."

"Huh?"

Why'd they ask me? Moreover, they made it sound like *I'd* been the one to make the final decision. I couldn't understand why in addition to Fuka, the other leaders were also nodding seriously. The group then proceeded to explain our strategy to the rest of the crowd.

"...Anyway, that's our plan. Silver-Haired also agrees that's our only viable option here."

"Well, if Silver-Haired says so."

What'd you mention my name for? And why does everyone look so convinced?

"Having the backing of a famous player puts everyone at ease. Like, it makes things seem less scary," someone explained to me. I guessed I was fairly famous on this server, even if it was mainly due to my monsters. And it was true that I held the top spot in the server contribution rankings. Oh well, I supposed it didn't matter as long as everyone understood what they were getting themselves into.

"All right, let's go get Glasya-Labolas."

"Okey-doke."

"Yessiree."

"Hey, wanna bet on who's gonna last until the end?"

Though we were far from spirited, our troops sallied forth regardless. Getting to Glasya-Labolas was our first objective—a fairly achievable goal, seeing that there was no way we'd lose sight of such a massive target. Once we came into contact with Glasya-Labolas, the plan was to take turns fighting it in five groups of ten until we ultimately faced our demise. If we'd had more people who could act as meat shields, we might have been able to go a different route. Unfortunately, there wasn't a single tank among the eight combat troopers accompanying us who had respawned. All we had were Thieves, Mages, and Healers. So, rather than take the offensive, we aimed to drag out the fight for as long as possible by evading attacks and healing ourselves. At least, that had been the plan...

"Didn't think we'd have *this* much trouble..."

"For real. This is a lot harder than I thought."

"What did you expect? Most of us are just measly crafter types," I grumbled.

"Ah ha ha..." Fuka laughed weakly in agreement. We hadn't even reached Glasya-Labolas and already the lesser mobs were slowing us down. I suspected it was due to the demon's influence that all of the monsters we encountered were shrouded in a black mist that enhanced their abilities. It made it all the more obvious that most of us were only crafters. Admittedly, I was one of the weakest of the weak, but even the stronger players had nothing on our frontline fighters. Furthermore, without any tanks or attackers, we were unable to fight the way we wanted to. Among the support team, Amelia and her tamed monsters were the strongest members. If it hadn't been for them and the few combat members who had respawned, our journey might have taken more than twice as long.

Still, thanks to our crafter status, we had a plentiful supply of potions and useful items. Between our items and a few carefully timed human wave attacks, we were somehow able to make it across the field and get relatively close to Glasya-Labolas. While we still had

some distance to cover, its thick, trunk-like legs were now observable from the gaps between the trees.

“Might be hard to go any further, though.”

“Guess we’ll just have to wait for Glasya-Labolas to come to us instead.”

Going any further would mean crossing over into uncertain territory. Since the monsters that appeared in the deepest parts of the forest were said to be on another level, we decided to conserve our energy and wait for Glasya-Labolas’s arrival. Perhaps it had been a good thing that the archdemon had been on its way to the village. If it hadn’t moved from its original spot, we might have lost a few members along the way before we even reached it.

“Okay, time to fight. Get ready, Group One,” Fuka announced.

“All right! It’s showtime, baby!”

“Hell yeah!”

The members of Group One instantly psyched themselves up. Roughly speaking, we had divided the teams so that the weakest members were destined to fight first. Based on that rule, I should have been in the first group, but for some reason, I was partnered with Amelia and assigned to Group Four instead. (If it wasn’t already obvious, this was mainly for the sake of everyone’s motivation.)

“I wouldn’t be able to fight if Olto died in front of my eyes!”

“Sakura, fight that monster...? Not on *my* watch! Group Three will keep the beast at bay! Right, guys?”

“Obviously!”

“Our group shall protect Bear Bear!”

“I wanna nuzzle Rick’s fur.”

And so the responses went. While the others fought, we subsequent parties were to observe the fight, keeping close enough to take over from the previous team as soon as it was called for.

“Okay, get ready! Glasya-Labolas is right around the corner!”

“D-Damn, it’s huge!”

“I can’t believe we have to fight *that*.”

As expected, the sight of the approaching giant had caused everyone to have second thoughts. You couldn’t really blame us, though, as very few of us were especially battle-hardened. Still, wimps or not, we were all gamers here. Once we’d gotten over our initial shock, we quickly regained our composure, arms at the ready once more. Even though we weren’t the ones fighting, the rest of us were also breathless, gripping our weapons until our knuckles turned white. We were equally a part of this.

“Brace yourselves!”

“Damn it!”

“You’ve got this, Group One!”

“Get ready to charge once it passes that bend in the road!”

“Roger!”

At the precise moment that the ten members of Group One were about to charge at Glasya-Labolas, a loud roar pierced the air. At first, I thought the demon had howled at us. Compared to Glasya-Labolas’s roar, however, it didn’t sound as menacing. If anything, the roar sounded somewhat reassuring. Moreover, the sound seemed to have come not from the beast in front of us, but from somewhere farther away.

“What was that?”

“Is it a new enemy?”

Amidst our confusion, Fuka pointed at somewhere beyond the forest.

“Look! Over there!”

“No way! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Who’s the wise guy that asked if it was a new enemy? You totally jinxed it!”

“I couldn’t help it! I’d always wanted to say that line!”

“Idiots! Ain’t no time to be arguing!”

The thing that was approaching us appeared to be an enormous beast. Although it was hard to get a clear view from between the trees, it was apparent that it was running on all fours. The huge, black mass was headed straight in our direction. If we had to fight that thing as well, we’d be obliterated in no time. After all, the creature was as large as the Guardian Bear.

“Hang on. In fact, isn’t that the Guardian Bear?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Now that you mention it, it does look like it!”

“Come to think of it, we’re the only ones who’ve seen it, huh...”

As it stood, Amelia and I were the only ones in the group who had encountered the Guardian Bear in the flesh before. Still, there was no mistaking it.

“Why’s it coming this way, though?”

“It hasn’t gone berserk again, has it?”

“You can’t be serious.”

The other players whispered nervously amongst themselves, unable to take their eyes off the hulking beast nearing us. From here, I couldn’t see any black mist, nor did it seem to have gone berserk. Regardless, it was probably best to play it safe.

“Let’s keep our distance for now and see what happens.”

“O-Okay.” Fuka nodded at my suggestion. With bated breath, we watched the Guardian Bear run towards us from the other side of Glasya-Labolas, waiting to see what would happen next. For a split second, the worst-case scenario of fighting both monsters crossed my mind. Fortunately, the devs weren’t that mean-spirited.

“Gawrrrr!”

“RRAAUUGGHHH!”

“Whoa! That was badass!”

“The bear’s gone and done it, folks!”

“Hell yeah! That’s the spot!”

To our utter amazement, the Guardian Bear lunged at Glasya-Labolas, wrapping its paws around the demon’s right leg before sinking its teeth into its thigh. Height-wise, even the Guardian Bear was only one-third the size of Glasya-Labolas. Nonetheless, it was encouraging to have such a reliable reinforcement.

“All right, everyone! Let’s use this opportunity to attack the demon all at once! If we’re able to draw some of its attention to us, the bear should be able to hold down Glasya-Labolas for a bit longer!”

Fuka’s suggestion was accepted unanimously, and we quickly changed tactics, charging at the archdemon as one. We split into two groups: one to attack the demon with magic, and the other to aid the Guardian Bear and everyone else with spells and potions. Admittedly, it took a bit of courage to get close to the Guardian Bear; thankfully, it showed no signs of attacking us. It seemed safe to assume that the bear was on our side.

“Okay, guys, let’s bring that ugly-ass giant down! Olto, you support the Guardian Bear, okay?”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

The Guardian Bear’s arrival had lifted our spirits, and we were ready to mobilize against Glasya-Labolas. However, we were soon confronted with the harshness of reality.

“Shoot, it’s already down fifty percent!”

“Damn it! Our lord and savior, Guardian Bear, is circling the drain!”

“Someone hurry up and heal it!”

“Can’t, we’re still on potion cooldown! Can anyone here use healing magic?! If so, you’re up!”

Ten minutes later, we had already lost one-third of our team; our equipment was useless against the damage, and getting hit equaled instant death. Warrior or fighter types might have been able to skillfully evade Glasya-Labolas’s attacks, which came more slowly than anticipated, but our inexperience in fighting on the front lines meant we were incapable of pulling off such a stunt.

“Aieee!”

“Oh, crap! I *told* you not to get too close!”

“Shit, watch out!”

I watched in horror as our numbers dwindled by the minute. Some were flattened by the archdemon's fists, while others were swallowed whole. Some were even thrown like a baseball.

"What's taking the combat troops?! Hurry up and come back!"

"GNNARRRR!"

"AAARGH!"

"Nooo! Sukegawa!" I screamed. Seeing a familiar face get trampled to death was nothing short of nightmarish! On top of that, the fewer people there were, the heavier the workload was for each of us surviving players, and the greater the risk of becoming the next target.

"Gawrrr!"

"Shit!"

I had just finished administering an anti-paralysis potion to the Guardian Bear. In the moment, I let my guard down, and before I knew it, Glasya-Labolas was bringing its fist straight down towards me at an alarming speed. There was no way I could dodge it in time. *Welp, this is it. Guess I'm done for.* If I died, my monsters would respawn along with me, meaning our group would be short five members. No doubt that would be quite a blow.

But—and I know this is just an excuse—hear me out. Although we'd been taking turns healing the Guardian Bear, the other players were dropping like flies, and my turn had come much sooner than planned. As a result, I'd panicked and failed to pay adequate attention to my surroundings. *No wonder I was in this mess.* Yet, despite facing certain death, I felt oddly calm. Just then, Olto jumped in front of me and shoved me out of harm's way.

"Mm-mm!"

"Huh? Olto?"

"Mm."

As Olto grinned at me, a sinister shadow loomed over him. The next instant...

Thwack!

The sound of an enormous fist slamming into the ground reverberated through the air. The hand missed me by mere inches, and the blast blew me backwards, throwing me onto my butt. Panicking, I glanced up to see the demon's fist smack in the middle of where I had been moments ago. I hadn't the slightest sliver of hope—there was no way Olto could have survived that blow. Glasya-Labolas lifted its fist off the ground, revealing nothing but empty space beneath it. All I saw was grass and dirt: Olto was nowhere to be seen.

"Olto... It can't be!"

I ran to the spot where Olto had been, but obviously, there was nothing there. *Crap.* Even though I'd been saved, I felt like crying. The

smile Olto had flashed at me in his final moments haunted me, forever seared into my memory. Come to think of it, this was the first time one of my monsters had died in front of me. Olto's death had affected me more than I thought. Although I knew he would respawn eventually, it was still a huge shock to the system to witness one of my monsters get killed before my own eyes.

"Damn it...! You rotten, ugly son of a bitch! You'll pay for this!"

"...!"

"Growl growl!"

In my fury, I almost threw myself at the archdemon, only to be held back by Sakura and Bear Bear.

"...!"

"Growl!"

Sakura gave me an admonishing glare while Bear Bear repeatedly jabbed my leg with their soft teddy bear paws.

"Grr. Sorry, you two," I gritted my teeth in frustration.

"..."

"Growl."

Don't do anything rash; otherwise, Olto would have died for nothing. While I hadn't expected to be chided by my monsters, their actions did help me get a grip on myself. I hadn't been the only one shaken by Olto's death, though.

"O-O-O-Olto!"

"Gnomey, no!"

"Aaah!"

Cries of dismay erupted from Olto's fans, who had witnessed his death. Several players even came to a standstill and were killed as a result. *I know I'm a fine one to talk, but jeez, get a grip, will ya?!* How was it that they were *more* stunned than me?

"Eeep!"

"Amelia!"

Glasya-Labolas closed its mighty fist around Amelia, who had been rattled the most, and tossed her like a rag doll. The Tamer flailed about helplessly as she soared through the air before gravity sent her hurtling towards the ground.

"EEEEEEK!" she screamed before crashing into the earth with a sickening thud. Thankfully, because this was a game, there was no fear of splitting open like a watermelon even if you fell from a great height. Players didn't have to worry about their blood and other bodily fluids splattering everywhere or their intestines spilling out. They simply slammed into the ground, body fully intact, and lost their HP. Regardless, it was pretty terrifying to see someone fall to their death.

"Sorry, everyone..." Amelia sniffled as she transformed into

polygons and disintegrated, her life meter completely drained from the fall. Worse still, her exit meant that her monsters, one of our major assets in this fight, had also disappeared along with her. Things were looking pretty bad. As if to add insult to injury, the archdemon managed to free itself from the grasp of the Guardian Bear, who had been holding down its right foot. The demon sent the bear flying, and it crumpled into a heap on the ground. Although a few players with healing magic quickly rushed to its side, their attempts to revive it were unsuccessful. While it appeared to have avoided death, it now seemed unable to move. We'd just lost our most potent damage dealers and our last ray of hope in quick succession.

"Silver-Haired! Wouldn't it be better to pull back and regroup?" Fuka yelled.

"G-Good point," I replied.

"Got it, I'll pass it o—"

"HRROOGA!"

As Fuka and I discussed a potential retreat, another mysterious roar tore through the woods.

"Look, over there!" someone yelled.

"Something else is coming our way! What is that?"

"Is it a bird?"

"Is it a plane? ...Wait a minute, it's not even flying!"

"Well, that's how the joke goes. One thing's for sure, though—it definitely ain't Superman..."

Amidst the hubbub, an enormous boar appeared in front of us, looking gallant with its jet-black fur and curved tusks. I recognized this creature too. It was the protector of the other sacred tree—the Guardian Boar.

"Hrrooga!"

"Gawrrr!"

The Guardian Boar showed no signs of slowing down as it charged headlong at Glasya-Labolas's other leg. It used its long tusks to lock the demon's left leg in place, and sunk its teeth into the demon's ankle and prevented it from moving. Seeing this, Fuka immediately began barking instructions to the surviving players.

"Now's our chance to regroup! Everyone, hurry up and gather 'round Silver-Haired!"

"What? Why me?"

"Because you're our leader, duh!"

"Says who?! I thought *you* were supposed to be our leader, Fuka!"

"Correction, I'm the leader of the *cooking* team! You, on the other hand, are the superintendent! Besides, you're like the top contributor to this server! Right, guys?" Fuka appealed to the other crafters who had gathered around us in the meantime. To my utter dismay and

bewilderment, everyone nodded approvingly.

“B-But why...? Hey! You’re just trying to pass the buck, aren’t you?!”

“...O-Of course not! Don’t be silly!”

“E-Exactly! We just happen to think you’re the most qualified!”

Then why won’t you look me in the eye?! Damn it, you guys better do whatever I say!

“Ugh, fine! Patch yourselves up first. Once that’s done, go aid the Guardian Boar! Hurry!”

“Aye aye, Sergeant!” the crowd replied in unison. *Sheesh, y’all are a bunch of opportunists!* Still, everyone was quick to act. If anything, communication was much smoother now that there were fewer of us, and we were better coordinated as a group. The fact that one of the monsters we’d helped had sided with us and come to our rescue was an excellent morale boost as well. The crafting team was in high spirits as we rushed to and fro in an effort to regroup. It only took us three minutes to get into formation again, distribute recovery items to everyone, and heal ourselves. I was completely taken aback by how quickly we were able to recover. Without losing momentum, we charged at Glasya-Labolas once more.

“Let’s do this, guys! Time to avenge Olto’s death!” one of Olto’s fans hollered, her expression grave.

“Hell yeah!” the crowd whooped. Admittedly, Olto was no longer on the battlefield, but it wasn’t as if he was gone for good—he would respawn once I returned to the village square. Surely there was no need to be so fired up...? While Olto’s fans sounded dead serious, the other players looked like they were just playing along and having a good time. They sure were a fun-loving lot.

“We’ll attack the demon, and make sure to aid the boar!” the Olto fan continued.

“CHARGE!”

“Hey, don’t overdo it. We’re only doing this to buy some time!” I yelled after the people who’d taken off running.

“Raarr!”

Crap, those overzealous idiots were getting carried away! What were they thinking, charging at a raid boss with such flimsy equipment?! Predictably, one of the players was caught by Glasya-Labolas and swallowed alive. Despite the Guardian Boar clamping down on its left leg, the archdemon still towered far above the trees in the forest. It could reach quite far simply by bending over, not to mention it could stretch its arms like a rubber band. Although it looked humanoid in form, its body was extremely limber, bending and twisting in ways beyond ordinary human physical limits. One by one, our comrades fell prey to the demon’s maw and claws.

That was far from the only problem we had to deal with, though. The black smoke it emitted from its fists periodically was a long-range attack that, on top of dealing damage, paralyzed those it hit. Even more troublesome was its AoE attack that it cast at regular intervals. The black light was fairly powerful and devastating for us crafters, who had lower max HP to begin with. While it wasn't bad enough to kill us, it cost us quite a bit of time in recovery.

"Shit! The Guardian Boar's on its last legs! Gotta heal—"

"Grawrrr!"

"Guh!"

I had been on my way to help the Guardian Boar when Glasya-Labolas grabbed me from behind. Apparently, I hadn't fully recovered from the shock of Olto's death, the world around me a blur. That being said, I'm not confident that I'd have been able to dodge its attack even if I *had* seen it coming.

"Grrrowr!"

"Eek!"

I felt an unpleasant floating sensation as though my insides were being squashed, before I went into a nosedive. I realized that Glasya-Labolas had thrown me. As I fell, I briefly considered which would've been a worse way to die: getting thrown or being eaten alive. Falling felt like an eternity, and if I hadn't had something else to occupy my mind, I would've bawled my eyes out of sheer terror. The ground was now inches away from my face.

"AAAAH!"

Even though I knew this was just a game, I couldn't help squeezing my eyes shut and protecting my head with my hands instinctively. Free-falling was scary as hell! The next instant, I crashed into the ground with a slam-bang thud. Compared to the sound, however, the impact I felt was negligible, as though I'd simply landed on a polyurethane mat. Nevertheless, when I opened my eyes, I was no longer on the battlefield, but back in the village square. So I *had* died after all.

"Mm-mm!"

"Olto! Is that you?!"

"Mmm!"

Olto sprinted towards me and threw himself around my waist, burying his face in my robes as though he'd been waiting for my arrival.



Regardless, tamed monsters didn't automatically respawn upon death. It was only when their master died and joined them at the revival point that they showed up again in-game. Given that he'd just respawned himself, I knew he hadn't *actually* missed me in the literal sense of the word. Even so, I found his reaction oddly endearing.

"Olto! Thanks for saving my life back there. You did good!"

"Mm..." Olto scratched his head sheepishly. I ruffled his hair practically into a bird's nest, but Olto didn't seem to mind, beaming delightedly all the while.

"Mmm."

"C'mere, you little munchkin!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

Immediately, Rick and Bear Bear hugged me from both sides. They seemed to be protesting against Olto hogging up my attention, looking up at me with expectant puppy dog eyes. Of course, it wouldn't be fair to leave them out; they had also done their fair share in the battle, acting as decoys and carrying potions to the other players.

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten you guys! C'mere!"

"Growl growl!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Obviously, I couldn't forget Sakura either! Unlike her siblings, she'd been too shy to make a move and hung back, fidgeting. Nevertheless, I patted her on the head like everyone else.

"...♪"

Good, she seemed happy too. While I was playing with my monsters, I heard someone address me from behind.

"You too, huh, Silver-Haired?"

"Hey, Amelia. Yep. I got the no-rope bungee treatment too."

"Must've been seriously scary."

"Yeah, totally. I couldn't help screaming."

Presently, we were joined by Amelia, who had been hanging around in the square for a while. Having met the same grisly end, we began recounting our harrowing experiences of free-falling without a safety harness. Several more players joined our ranks as we chatted—yet more of our teammates.

"Damn it, I died!"

"That was SO scary!"

"Didn't think all three of us would get swallowed at once..."

The respawners sank to the ground in defeat. Between the two options that I'd been contemplating earlier, being eaten alive did sound like a more traumatizing way to die. Perhaps I'd gotten off

relatively easy.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked them.

“Hey, Silver-Haired... It’s okay, my knees just gave way.”

“You don’t sound okay.”

“Never mind that, though. Could you let everyone know that the combat troops have returned?”

“Really? They have?”

Kokuten and the others appeared to have returned and resumed their fight against the archdemon.

“Yeah. I think they’re fighting alongside the Guardian Boar.”

“I’ll go tell everyone!” Amelia exclaimed. She began relaying the message of the troop’s return to the players in the square. Upon hearing the good news, the crowd erupted into cheers. I didn’t blame them; they must have been pretty anxious. I’d secretly been dreading the worst-case scenario where we’d have to take on Glasya-Labolas all by ourselves again. Thank goodness that was no longer the case.

“Phew. Looks like we can go back to working behind the scenes again.”

Still, that didn’t mean things would now be easier for us. On the contrary, the battle seemed to be intensifying the closer the troops got to the village, giving the support team more work to do.

“Sakura! Go give these bowls of miso soup to those people over there!”

“...!”

“Bear Bear, you go cheer up that player! If I’m not mistaken, they were a fan of yours!”

“Growl!”

“Rick, did you get us some medicinal herbs?!”

“Chirp!”

“Good! Once Olto fetches us some water, we’ll be able to make more potions!”

“Mm-mm!”

My monsters bustled around, their hands just as full as everyone else. The moments ticked by in that fashion, when suddenly...

“RRAAAUUGGHHH!”

“Huh? Again?”

Some time after my respawn, a thunderous roar shook the village, causing a stir among us. Clearly, this could mean nothing but bad news. The situation felt similar to when Glasya-Labolas first teleported. As luck would have it, I was yet again in the middle of concocting a potion. Worse still, the current step I was on demanded all of my attention—I couldn’t afford to pause what I was doing.

“For Pete’s sake! Now what?!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“...!”

Olto and Sakura came to fetch me, obviously flustered. Regardless, they were smart enough not to get in the way of my work.

“...Phew, all done now.”

“Growl!”

“Okay, okay. No need to pull so hard. What happened?”

“Chirp!”

Rick scampered up my arm and hopped onto my shoulder, then pinched my cheek, pointing in the direction of Glasya-Labolos. Could the combat troops have succeeded in defeating it? Alas, the archdemon was still very much alive. Even worse, it seemed to have gotten a massive upgrade.

“Is that a...lizard? No. A dragon, maybe?”

Glasya-Labolos had transformed into its final form. Evidently, the event had entered the next phase, thanks to the combat troops' efforts. Until now, the demon's head had been smooth and globular; now, it had several new organic protrusions. Given how its apostles had also undergone a similar transformation, Glasya-Labolos's metamorphosis was to be expected. At first, I thought the archdemon had assumed the form of a lizard. Considering it had horns, however, a dragon seemed more likely. As the final boss, it was fitting that it took on the appearance of what many regarded as the most powerful mythical creature. The beast was still human from the neck down, but its face and tail were that of a dragon. Brown scales covered its entire bipedal body. It was, in actuality, half human and half dragon—or rather, half *giant*, half dragon, considering its size.

“Dang. It looks strong as hell.”

There was no doubt that shit was about to hit the fan. That wasn't the only unexpected development in the event, though.

“Yuto, my boy. Do you have a minute?” A familiar voice called out to me.

“Oh hey, Cayenne. What are you all doing here?”

I turned around to find ten or so elders standing before me, despite our instructions for them to stay put at home. Among the group of old men was an unfamiliar face, who introduced himself as the village leader. Come to think of it, this was my first time meeting him.

“Ahem. On behalf of everyone, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to you all for fighting to protect our village,” the chief thanked me.

“Uh, don't mention it,” I replied sheepishly. It wasn't as if we were doing this for *them*, per se; this was an event, after all. I was pretty sure no one was fighting purely for the villagers' sake, except maybe for Siegfried. As most of us were only doing what needed to be done

to improve our overall results, I was unsure how to respond to such a sincere expression of gratitude.

“We can’t let you travelers do all the work whilst we hide away in the comfort of our homes!”

“We may not be battle-hardened, but we at least know how to use a bow,” the village elders declared, showing me the bows and arrows on their backs. Seeing them handle their weapons with their scrawny arms didn’t feel reassuring in the slightest.

“For real? Do you intend to fight too?”

“We may not be able to enter the forest, but we can still rain arrows down on that Goliath as it nears the village!”

“Absolutely! We’ll fight with you!”

Was I supposed to rejoice at this news? On the contrary, the village elders’ responses only served to fuel my anxiety. What if they died helping us? I felt like that would cause irreparable damage. Still, I couldn’t very well tell them to piss off, not when they were so determined. That could lower my favorability score with them; plus, I had a hunch that it was better not to refuse their help. That being said, we had to prepare for contingencies in the event of a face-to-face confrontation. The best-case scenario would be to defeat Glasya-Labolas before it reached the village. That would probably give us a leg up in the rankings, and we could also avoid jeopardizing the villagers’ lives.

In the end, it all came down to how well the combat troops fared. *C’mon, guys, please defeat Glasya-Labolas before the whole village turns into a war zone! We don’t want these old geezers to die!* Sadly, my prayers went unanswered as people began respawning even faster. The archdemon’s second form was proving to be a great menace. Even after the old men departed for the Adventurers’ Guild to prepare for battle, the cyclopean dragon-human hybrid showed no signs of stopping.

“Damn. That’s gotta hurt,” I muttered as Glasya-Labolas’s tail sent a bunch of players hurtling through the air like pebbles. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the demon proceeded to shoot a black laser-like beam from its mouth. While my immediate thought was Dragon Breath, it didn’t seem to be fiery. Thankfully, it looked like we needn’t worry about our combat troops perishing in flames—not that I knew if forest fires even existed in this game. The setting was fairly realistic, though, so it was probably best to be on our guard.

“Whoops, no time to be marveling at the view.”

Seeing someone respawn in front of my eyes jerked me out of my reverie and brought me back to reality. There were more pressing matters to attend to at the moment. As long as the battle was still ongoing, I had to contribute in whatever way I could.

“Hey, you okay?” I offered my hand to the warrior who had sunk to their knees upon respawning.

“Oh, it’s you, Silver-Haired. Thanks.”

The player’s leather armor was tattered and full of holes, as though corroded. This was the first time I’d seen anyone respawn in such a state. Curious, I asked them what had happened. As I suspected, the damage appeared to be the result of Glasya-Labolas’s mysterious beam attack, which turned out to be capable of damaging your armor. Since the damaged equipment needed to be repaired by a blacksmith, players hit by it were forced out of action for a longer time. As a result, the troops’ combat power had decreased significantly. The whole thing was a vicious cycle. We should have expected as much from a raid boss: they were highly skilled at targeting players’ Achilles’ heels.

“Don’t tell me we have to go fight that thing again...?”

Currently, the square was packed with roughly a hundred players who had died, and their numbers were only expected to increase. It seemed likely that the combat troops would soon suffer from a shortage of fighters. Others appeared to share the same concern as me.

“Silver-Haired! We’ve been summoned!” Fuka yelled as she came to fetch me.

“Gotcha. Guess we don’t have much choice, really,” I sighed. My worst fears had been confirmed. “If we can be of some help, then by all means.”

“Absolutely!”

After all, we were this close to Cayenne and the other old folks getting involved in this fight. I didn’t want any harm to befall the NPCs if I could help it. Unexpectedly, we were greeted by two figures at the village entrance. They were neither Cayenne nor one of the other elders, although they were still old men—albeit much more intimidating than the others. Neither did they appear to be enemies, as one of the men was none other than Cacal, the hunter. His frightening appearance made him stick out like a sore thumb. His unwillingness to sell his wares unless you had a high favorability score meant that most people failed to realize that deep down, he was a perfectly nice person, if a bit laconic.

Accompanying him was yet another fierce-looking giant of a man, who was about the same height as Cacal and just as brawny. The only difference was his head. Unlike Cacal, who had a full head of disheveled, overgrown white hair, this man was bald. His head, face, and arms bore multiple scars, adding to the menacing aura he emanated. The two men also carried different weapons. Cacal shouldered a massive bow and held a crude billhook in one hand; in contrast, the bald guy had a giant ax on his back. In terms of who

looked more threatening, they were about equal.

“Um, Cacal? What on earth are you doing here? And who may your friend be?” I asked tentatively.

“Ah, it’s you, Yuto. We’re joining the fight.”

“Greetings, travelers. The name’s Clans. I work as a lumberjack in Alf,” Cacal’s companion chimed in.

“Oh, hello. Pleased to meet you.”

Unlike his partner, the burly giant who identified himself as Clans seemed reasonably sociable. It was weird how he immediately went from fearsome to likable just by opening his mouth and smiling. We chatted briefly, and I learned that the two of them were the strongest warriors Alf boasted.

“Cacal and I got up to all sorts a mischief when we were young!” Clans chuckled heartily.

“We sure did.”

Although I was curious about what their idea of “mischief” entailed, I had a feeling it was best not to ask. In any case, they were both undoubtedly ironclad warriors, a fact easily ascertained by a quick appraisal of their weapons. As a matter of fact, their weapons were superior to those of top frontliners and required ridiculously high stats to use. The fact that they were able to wield these weapons was proof enough that they were far stronger than us. It wasn’t every day that such powerful fighters offered to lend us a hand.

“We’re just a couple of retired ol’ geezers, but a crisis is a crisis!” Clans thumped his chest.

“Can’t have outsiders doing all the work,” Cacal agreed. It felt reassuring to gain such capable allies. So capable were they that most of the crafters were befuddled by their presence. However, after seeing my monsters and I interact with the two old men, they seemed to relax, realizing that they meant no harm. By the time we headed out, the others had at least become capable of exchanging pleasantries with the pair.

“Silver-Haired! Over there, I can see it! What now?” Fuka asked.

“Don’t ask me... Clans, Cacal. What’s our next move?”

“All right!” Clans announced. “I’ll lead the way and charge at the beast, so follow me if you have a weapon! Those who specialize in long-range attacks, you help Cacal!”

“G-Got it! You heard him! Let’s go!”

“Roger!”

“Understood!”

Not a single person objected to Clans’s proposal. There was something incredibly reassuring about him—perhaps we all felt as though things would work out if we followed the lead of a seasoned veteran.

“Let’s go! After me, you mad lads!” Clans bellowed.

“YAAAAARRR!” The crowd roared, sounding more like a gang of bandits following their leader’s command than a platoon of soldiers responding to their general. Normally, crafter types were pretty timid, so it was unusual to see them so excitable and bellicose. Even the combat troops were taken aback by their enthusiasm.

“Graarrgh! Take this, ya big bumbling bastard!”

Without losing speed, Clans charged headfirst into the archdemon and swung his giant ax at its foot. Seconds later, a stir of excitement and disbelief swept through the crowd: Clans had just shaved off a significant amount of Glasya-Labolas’s HP.

“Hey, fellas! How’s it hanging? We’ve come to help ya!”

Clans’s words caused an uproar. The combat troops had been fighting a losing battle, having lost both guardian beasts. Thankfully, they had gained a new formidable ally just in the nick of time.

“Now’s our chance! Everyone, follow the bald guy’s lead!”

“Hear, hear! We can’t let baldy steal the limelight!”

“Who’re ya calling bald?! The name’s *Clans*! I’ll have you know I’m the number one lumberjack in the village!”

“W-Whoa, you’re one badass lumberjack!”

“Damn straight! Never underestimate lumberjacks! Mwa ha ha!” Clans guffawed smugly. *Dude, watch out for Glasya-Labolas!*

“Grrroowwrrr!” the demon howled as it brought its humongous fist down on Clans. It was unlikely that he’d be able to escape unscathed, no matter how strong he was.

“RUN, Clans!” I screamed in vain. Even if he had heard me, it was too late to escape now. I couldn’t believe that one of our lifelines was about to make his exit already. Was this what the devs had in mind when they planned this event? *What a dick move!* However, the catastrophe I had dreaded never materialized.

Ker-smack!

I heard a dull, rupturing sound. Something appeared to have repelled Glasya-Labolas’s fist, as though its arm had been struck by a hammer.

“You’re being too careless.”

The quiet rebuke seemed to have come from right behind me. I whipped my head around and saw Cacal, who had yet to lower his bow.

“W-Was that you, Cacal?” I stuttered.

“Yeah.”

Apparently, the arrow he fired had contained enough force to repel the demon’s attack. The power and precision of his aim were astounding.

“Th-This dude’s the real deal too!”

“That’s Cacal, the best hunter in the village! He ain’t really the chatty type, but I can assure you his skills are top-notch!”

“That’s me all right.”

“Hunters are awesome!”

Judging by the way their faces lit up, this seemed to have given the combat troops sufficient motivation to continue fighting.

“Fuka! Tell everyone to use this opportunity to regroup!” I instructed.

“Got it,” she replied.

“Amelia, you go notify Kokuten’s party!”

“Roger!”

I was about to go look for Siegfried next, but that turned out to be unnecessary: he had decided to come to me.

“Yuto! I see you’ve brought us some amazing backup!” the knight waved at me from a distance as his trusty steed, Silver, clip-clopped my way. The unexpected contrast between his ridiculously good looks and the homeliness of his horse made it hard for me to dislike him, and I found myself smiling despite the battle raging around us.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect them to be that strong either,” I answered.

“Thanks to them, I reckon we can keep going for a while longer. To tell the truth, people were getting pretty discouraged by all the terrors we’ve had to endure. I was starting to think we would lose this battle.”

The combat troops appeared to be faring far worse than I’d thought. Having respawned once myself, I knew how terrifying it was to die. Once was bad enough, but experiencing *multiple* gruesome deaths? No wonder they had been so disheartened.

“Will you and the other crafters help us from here on out?” Siegfried asked.

“Sure. That’s what we’re here for. Just give us the word.”

“That’s reassuring to hear. In that case, I’d like you to heal the rear guards first. There are quite a few players who find strength and comfort in your tamed monsters.”

“Ah, I see.”

Basically, our job was to be cheerleaders. That was understandable: I’d be willing to go above and beyond too, if I had a cute girl cheering for me. No doubt some people would be able to push past their limits with my monsters’ encouragement. As I reflected on Siegfried’s words, the knight raised his sword high above his head and addressed the players around him.

“The crafting team has brought us some reliable allies!” Siegfried’s voice rang out loud and clear. “Friends, now is not the time to give up! Let us defeat the raid boss and protect the Village of Alf!”

“AYE!”

Now, *this* was what you called a charismatic figure. The crowd roared as one after hearing Siegfried’s speech, raising their weapons and punching the air in response.

“The beast’s almost out of HP! Charge!”

With Clans and Cacal buying us some time, the players were able to catch their breath and get back into formation. The adrenaline rush from the realistic combat, the realization that we were in the final stretch of the event, and the elation of working together towards a common goal—all of these factors combined roused the crowd to a fever pitch. Siegfried’s little pep talk was the cherry on the cake; everyone was ready to roll.

“Raaaarrr! Time to take down that bastard!”

“Chaaarge!”

“We’ll deliver the final blow!”

The advance guards rushed headlong at the beast, not so much as flinching at their comrades’ deaths. Those in the rear were also determined to finish this battle once and for all, firing all they had, with utter disregard for their MP or benefit-cost ratio. While the troops were undeniably on a rampage, there was absolutely no hesitation in their movements, and they seemed hell-bent on winning. Their gamer senses also appeared to be telling them that victory was near.

“EEYAWWRRRR!”

After ten minutes of desperate fighting, with many players risking their lives in the process, Glasya-Labolas uttered a howl unlike any we’d heard so far. If anything, it sounded more like a scream of anguish. Thankfully, I was able to react immediately this time as I’d just finished up my task. What was I doing, you ask? I was just chilling and making potions in the village, having already died a while back. *You got a problem with that?*

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Okay okay, calm down, I see it. No need to pull me, guys!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

“Like I said, I see it this time!”

My companions clamored around me, tugging on my robes and pointing frantically in the direction of Glasya-Labolas. *I get how you guys feel, but chill.* The remaining troops must have put up a remarkable fight, I thought, staring at the motionless archdemon with its head thrown back, mouth frozen midwail. Gradually, its body faded into the background. Within a minute, its colossal figure had

vanished into thin air without a trace, as though it had never existed at all. At the same time, a server-wide announcement rang throughout the village.

“Congratulations. Your server has successfully defeated the archdemon, Glasya-Labolas.”

Instantly, the players in the square burst into cheers.

“Woo-hoo!”

“We did it!”

“Good job, combat troops!”

As much as I wanted to rejoice with the others, I was utterly overwhelmed by the sudden barrage of notifications I received. Since I was a Tamer, not only did I have to deal with announcements for my own level-ups, but for my monsters’ as well. As I was busily skimming through my notifications, Amelia joined my side. She appeared to have respawned as well. I supposed that was to be expected, though, given that Glasya-Labolas had gone completely haywire towards the end, with players dying by the second. By my estimate, there had probably been fewer than a hundred players left standing.

“Squee! Silver-Haired! Olto! We did it!” Amelia whooped.

“Hey, Amelia. Good work back there.”

“Thanks! You did good too, Olto!”

“Mm-mm.”

Amelia squatted down and started chatting away to Olto.

“Are you okay, Olto? Were you hurt anywhere?”

“Mm?”

Well, no changes there. Amelia kept fussing over Olto, squealing delightedly as he cocked his head in response. I stole a glance at the monsters behind her to gauge their reactions. They didn’t seem jealous in the least; in fact, they appeared quite exasperated. Now that I had a better look at them, I was starting to see the appeal in rabbits. *That fur, that wiggling nose, that rabbity cuteness!*

“Pwee?”

Wh-What the hell was this adorable creature?!

“Crap, I wanna pet it so bad.”

What I wouldn’t give to run my hands all over this rabbit!

Unfortunately, Amelia and I weren’t friends, so my attempts to pet it were thwarted each time. I now understood why all those people had been desperate to befriend *me*.

“...”

“Pwee?”

“How cute can you be...?”

The rabbit gazed up at me with round, glistening eyes, twitching its nose adorably. The heart-shaped pattern on its back only added to its already irresistible charm. *Gah, I can’t take this anymore! Stop! Be*

still, my right hand!

“Hey, Amelia. Wanna be friends?”

“Huh?! For real?”

“Yeah. Or do you not want to?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’d LOVE to be friends with you!”

Evidently, we had been thinking the same thing. I happily exchanged friend codes with Amelia, grinning like an idiot all the while. My eyes were on her rabbit, while her gaze was fixated on Olto.

“Can I play with Olto?”

“Sure. Mind if I pet your rabbit?”

“Of course! So, you’ve set your sights on Bun Bun, eh? An excellent choice!”

“Come on, how can I *not* pet this fluff?”

“You said it! You have great taste, Silver-Haired! Bun Bun has the most amazing fur! Fluffy doesn’t even begin to describe it—*floofy’s* more like it! A single touch, and I guarantee you’ll never be the same again!”

For all her fangirling over Olto, her monsters appeared to be her number one loves. As soon as I asked if I could cuddle Bun Bun, she began reciting all their positive qualities, beaming from ear to ear. *Still, Bun Bun, eh...?* Not that I was in any position to criticize her, seeing how I’d given one of my monsters the highly original name Bear Bear. I gratefully accepted Bun Bun from Amelia. The rabbit relaxed in my arms, seemingly at ease.

“Pwee.”

Whoa. Its fur was a different softness from Rick’s and Bear Bear’s, its body incredibly squishy. As Amelia had boasted, it was the very essence of ‘floofy.’

“...Gulp.”

“Pwee?”

Gah, I wanna bury my face in its soft, white tummy so badly! If only I could huff its fur with my entire face... I couldn’t do that to someone else’s monster, though; that would be overstepping the bounds. I decided to settle for huffing Rick’s stomach later instead. As Amelia and I were adoring each other’s monsters, the village elders reappeared before us. They then proceeded to utter their thanks.

“You have our deepest gratitude, Yuto.”

“Thanks to you and your friends, peace has been restored to Alf.”

“Thank you! It’s all thanks to you that no harm came to our village.”

Other villagers joined them, and we were soon surrounded by a clamoring crowd, with Amelia dragged into it unwittingly. I almost felt like a K-pop idol being awaited by their adoring fans at the airport. Why had they come to *me*, though? I’d barely done anything,

and yet, here they were acting as though *I* had saved the village. Shouldn't they be thanking Kokuten or Siegfried instead?

"Hey, Amelia. Why's everyone gathered around *me*?" I whispered in her ear.

"Isn't it because you're the number one contributor of this server?" she replied. I had totally forgotten about that rank. To be honest, it still felt surreal, given that I'd risen to the top spot without even realizing it. Regardless, considering how I'd been elected leader earlier and thanked by the villagers, it was evident that this title held sway.

"I am confident that God, too, has witnessed and acknowledged your heroic deeds. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for saving our village."

By "God," they probably meant the devs, right? Although I wasn't sure how the other servers were faring, I reckoned we hadn't done too badly. After all, no harm had befallen the village, the sacred trees had been restored to full health, and, most importantly, we had defeated Glasya-Labolas. One thing that did concern me was the fate of the guardian beasts. The archdemon had dealt significant damage to both Guardian Bear and Guardian Boar during the fight, effectively incapacitating them. I was afraid that if they were considered dead, we would receive a negative score. To my relief, Kokuten informed me upon his return that Glasya-Labolas's death had resuscitated the guardian beasts, and they had left the village shortly after. *Phew. Thank goodness for that.*

The majority of the combat troops had damaged equipment, the bulk of their HP and MP depleted. Nevertheless, everyone looked immensely cheerful. No doubt they all felt deeply accomplished after defeating such a powerful boss. Obviously, we crafters were just as overjoyed. Not only had we actually participated in the battle, but we'd also supported the troops on the front lines with our items. While we may not have contributed as much in terms of fighting, on the whole, we'd played just as important a role as the combat team. Naturally, we shared their sense of accomplishment.

Finally, the village chief had an announcement for us:

"We would like to celebrate our victory by holding a festival of sorts. I hope you will join us too, dear travelers!"

Chapter Seven: The End of the Event and Its Aftermath

Pi-hyarara!

Boom-bah-bah-boom!

A lively ensemble played, the high-pitched wail of a bamboo flute and the deep, booming beats of various taiko drums echoing throughout the square. Now that peace had been restored to Alf, the villagers had decided to hold a festival in celebration of our victory over Glasya-Labolas. Although they had referred to it specifically as a “fest,” the overall vibe was unmistakably that of a Japanese matsuri, despite the landscape and the villagers’ attire being distinctly European. All around us were stalls with various offerings. A high wooden platform stood in the center of the square, where villagers danced a traditional Bon dance to the pounding rhythm of Japanese festival music. Seriously, when had they assembled all this? The village carpenters had seemingly constructed the wooden stage within seconds. Since it was still light outside, the festival was somewhat lacking in gaiety; all the same, both players and NPCs seemed to be having a great time.

My monsters and I strolled through the square, admiring the festivities. Somehow I was no longer bothered by the many pairs of eyes boring into us. It helped that most of the attention wasn’t directed at me.

“Wow, check out all these stalls. Do you guys want anything? Y’all get 500 G each to spend, okay?”

“Mm-mm.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl.”

“...♪”

My companions chirped happily in unison. While this was their first time experiencing a festival, they seemed to relish the exuberant atmosphere, eyes shining expectantly. The first to show interest in any of the stalls was Rick, who was perched atop my shoulder.

“Chirp!”

“Find something you like, buddy?”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick pulled my hair and pointed one of his tiny fingers at a stall. As I approached the vendor, I realized that I recognized her.

“Hey, Knut.”

“Why, hello there. Fancy seeing you again.”

The vendor was none other than Knut, the bean farmer.

Unsurprisingly, she was selling roasted beans. No wonder Rick had been so insistent. I recalled the time I’d bought him some in the Town of Beginnings, and how he had utterly demolished them. Rick prodded my cheek, pointing at the beans frantically.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Okay, okay. Calm down, will ya? I’ll buy them for you.”

“That’ll be 200 G, please,” Knut informed me. Dang, that was even more expensive than the ones I’d bought before! That being said, I couldn’t go back on my promise now, not after I’d given Rick my word. Resigned, I paid Knut for the roasted beans and accepted a bag from her. For the record, they *were* higher in quality than the ones being sold in the Town of Beginnings. I supposed it was only fair that they were more expensive.

“Here you go, Rick.”

“Chirp!”

Cromch cromch cromch cromch!

Straight away, Rick buried his face in the bag and began gobbling up the beans. His tail and butt were sticking adorably out of the top—no way I could get mad at that.

“Eat as much as you like, bud.”

“Chirp,” Rick replied between bites. Emboldened by this, Olto now tugged on my robes to grab my attention.

“Mm-mmm!”

“What do *you* want, Olto?”

“Mm!”

Olto pointed at a stall run by yet another familiar face.

“Huh? That you, Chief?”

“Well, well, if it isn’t our good man, Yuto. Fancy a drink?”

“Is this juice?”

“Indeed. Care to try some honey juice?”

The village chief appeared to be an avid beekeeper, and had made these drinks with his homegrown honey. As there were two types of juice—honey ginger and honey lemon—I got the former for me and Olto and the latter for Rick and Bear Bear. While both drinks only recovered your hunger status by thirty percent, the taste was to die for. I was keen to learn the recipe, but unfortunately, the chief was unwilling to share it with me, saying that it was top secret. I chalked it up to the fact that I didn’t have personal ties with him like I did with Cayenne. *Oh well, too bad.* My eyes met with Sakura, who was smiling at the rest of us while we sipped our drinks contentedly.

“A shame you can’t eat, Sakura. If only I could find something for

you too.”

“...♪”

Sakura shook her head, then held my hand and smiled, using her free hand to stroke Bear Bear’s head. She was probably trying to tell me that simply going around the festival together was fun enough. Still, it didn’t seem fair to not get her anything when the others were getting their share. As we continued on our way, Bear Bear came to a halt.

“Growl!”

“That a grocer?”

“Welcome!” The grocer greeted us.

“Hi there,” I greeted them back. “Fruit kabobs, eh? Interesting.”

“Growl growl!”

“I’d like one green peach skewer, please.”

“Mmm!”

“Want one too, Olto? Okay, I’ll take this purple persimmon skewer too, then.”

“You got it!”

Olto and Bear Bear skipped merrily as they munched on their fruit kabobs. That took care of everyone but Sakura—the others had all used up their allowance. *What to get her, though...*?

“Ah, found one.”

I had found what I was looking for, which was a shooting gallery. Stalls like these were pretty much a staple at outdoor fairs, especially Japanese-style festivals. The only difference was that this stall used bows and arrows instead of air rifles.

“This way, you can have some fun too. Right, Sakura?”

“...♪”

“Think I’ll have a go at it myself.”

One game cost 100 G to play, and players were given five arrows per round. The prizes differed depending on the total amount of points you earned. Surprisingly, you could even win event points in this game: one shooting gallery point was equivalent to one event point. That being said, even if I managed to get five bull’s-eyes in a row, the total maxed out at a hundred points.

“Let’s see. Reckon this is how you do it... Hup!”

“Mm...”

“Growl...”

“Hey, no need to sigh like that! What did you expect?”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

While I kept missing the target, Sakura was a natural. Her shots may not have been smack-dab in the middle, but they were as close as you could get to the center. After playing a total of five rounds, she

exchanged all her points for event points, for a modest score of sixty-nine points. I, on the other hand, had only won seven points in three rounds. *So what, though?* The most important thing was that we'd had fun. Sakura looked happy, and that was good enough for me.

Presently, we arrived in front of the wooden stage. I hadn't realized we'd walked all the way to the center of the square. While I spotted some NPCs dancing here and there, there weren't that many players around. *Fair enough.* You'd have to be pretty brave to join this crowd in broad daylight, given how much you'd stand out.

"Mmm!"

Just as I was about to walk past, Olto dashed off towards the crowd. Rick and Bear Bear immediately followed suit.

"Growl!"

"Chirp!"

"Don't tell me you wanna dance too?"

Oblivious to my misgivings, my companions joined the line of Bon dancers and began dancing. The NPCs made way for them, watching over them benignly.

"Mm-mm-mm."

"Growl growl."

"Chirp chirp."

Unsurprisingly, my monsters were terrible at Bon dancing, being uninitiated in the style. It was almost as though they were performing some sort of satanic ritual. Regardless, they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"...?"

"Wait, are you asking *me* to join?"

"...♪"

As I was debating whether to join the crowd, Sakura timidly pulled my hand. She seemed to be inviting me to dance with her.

"Fine, I'll come with you," I sighed. Sakura rarely asked for anything for herself—how could I possibly deny her this small request?

"...♪"

Once we joined up with the others, I decided to show them how to dance the proper way.

"This is how Bon dancing is done, okay? Watch and learn."

"Mm?"

"First, clap your hands twice here."

"Chirp!"

"Then, you go like this... Yup, that's it. You're doing great."

"Growl!"

"Is there anything you can't do, Sakura? Nope, Olto. Not like that."

“Mm?”

Sakura was a fast learner—no surprise there. What I hadn’t anticipated was how quickly *Bear Bear* was able to catch on. They were the next to master Bon dancing after Sakura, wiggling their plump booty adorably. While Olto lacked the other two’s knack for dancing, he appeared to be having the most fun, probably just happy to be part of the crowd.



I'd already given up on Rick. He flailed his arms and legs about wildly, his frenetic convulsions a far cry from the slower, more graceful movements a Bon dance called for. If I had to categorize his dance style based on my limited knowledge, I reckoned it was closest to break dancing. Seeing us enjoying ourselves, more and more people started to gather around.

"I wanna dance with Gnomey too!"

"How cute is that teddy bear?!"

"Can't remember the last time I did Bon dancing."

"Me neither. My hometown put a stop to it due to noise complaints."

The crowd appeared to consist of people who'd been wanting to dance but had been too shy to join until now, as well as fans of my monsters.

"Mm-mmm!"

"...♪"

"Growl growl."

"Chirp chirp!"

Within thirty minutes, countless players and NPCs had gathered around the stage. The sheer number of people meant there was a lot of inevitable jostling, but regardless, we all had a great time. Ultimately, we ended up dancing until the festival came to a close. Although the festivities had ended, the event was still ongoing, and we were free to spend our remaining time in Alf however we wanted. This was our last chance to buy items or fulfill the villagers' requests to earn bonus points. I doubted any points I earned at this stage would have a significant effect on my rank, and I'd already bought everything I wanted. Perhaps I would use this time to say my goodbyes.

As I was heading towards the exit, several players came up to me, eyes gleaming menacingly. At first, I thought they had come to yell or complain, but that wasn't the case; they were actually fans of my monsters here to demand I hold another photo shoot. To be honest, I'd totally forgotten that I'd made such a promise.

"Is everyone here already?" I addressed the group.

"Yep, we're all here. We just came on behalf of everyone."

Now that I thought about it, it was probably best to get the photo shoot over and done with now. Besides, I didn't enjoy the thought of people pestering me individually after the event. All the same, there were far more players than I expected. *Should I set a time limit for each person?* I wondered. Even then, it would probably take way too long if I were to ensure each player had their turn... Just thinking about it was already making me tired. Thankfully, the representatives of the group were gracious enough to throw me a lifeline, offering to make it

a group photo shoot instead of an individual one.

“Considering how many people want a pic, we figured it’d be impossible to do the same kind of shoot as last time.”

“We don’t wanna wear your monsters out either.”

The solution the group representatives proposed was a mass photography session—essentially a media scrum or Comiket-style cosplayer photo shoot—which would allow everyone to take photos at the same time. However, due to the nature of the shoot, they would be unable to dictate my monsters’ poses. That seemed kind of harsh, so I decided to relax the rules a bit by allowing them to take unlimited photos of the monster of their choosing for a full ten minutes, with the stipulation that they didn’t go around posting those screenshots online. At first, some players seemed unhappy with this arrangement, but once I explained that having to deal with so many people at once would overwhelm my monsters, they concurred with the setup.

After that, it was immediately lights, camera, and action. It wasn’t really a photo shoot in the traditional sense of the word; no one was holding a camera, as they only needed to snap a pic of what they were viewing with their screengrab function. Of course, this made the crowd look all the eerier, staring and squealing at my monsters posing. Honestly, I was a bit spooked.

“Gosh, Olto, you’re so handsome!”

“Who’s my little cutie-pie? *You* are, Sakura!”

“Look this way, Rick!”

“Hold that pose, Bear Bear! Love it!”

As time passed, the crowd’s cheers intensified, and their requests became more eccentric by the minute.

“Eep! You’re so cute, Olto! Hold it right there!”

“Excellent work, Sakura! Keep serving looks.”

“Nice one, Rick. Yes, that’s it. Straighten your thick, bushy tail for mama.”

“Looking sexy, Bear Bear. Mm-hm, point your butt this way and wiggle for me!”

Their posing instructions were getting lewder by the minute. Who did they think they were, pinup photographers? Asking Sakura to bite her thumb and look suggestively at the camera was still on the tame side. However, seeing several players panting heavily while taking screenshot after screenshot of Bear Bear shaking their butt made me question whether it was safe to continue the shoot. The photo sesh from hell finally ended at around 4:30 p.m. in-game time after a prolonged period of placating players and evading insistent friend requests. I sought refuge in the village, trying to calm my nerves by browsing some shops, when I ran into Fuka. She appeared to have been looking for me.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“There’s something I wanted to give you,” she replied. “Here, take this.”

“Fuka has sent you an item transfer request. Would you like to accept it?”

“Er, ingredients?”

“Yep. That’s your share.”

“Gotcha.”

When the boss battle ended, we had quite a few cooking and potion-making ingredients leftover. The leaders of the support team and combat troops had been discussing what to do with them; apparently, this was how they had opted to resolve the matter. Although Kokuten and the others had invited me to participate in the discussion as well, I’d been held up by the photo shoot, and truthfully, the whole thing sounded like a drag. Therefore, I’d left all the decision-making to them.

“Items such as potions and food will go to the combat troops. As for the remaining ingredients, we’ve divided them among us support members. This is your share, Silver-Haired.”

“That’s a lot.”

There were more than thirty ingredients altogether. Surely, this was too much...? My suspicions proved to be correct—I *had* received more items than the others as compensation for sharing my recipes and teaching them how to obtain food in the village.

“You sure about this? You guys shared your recipes with me too.”

“That may be so, but it was *your* recipes that contributed to the event. Simply sharing our recipes hardly seemed like a fair exchange. This is the least we could do.”

While I still felt like I’d received too much stuff, reading the list changed my mind. Fuka’s offering contained miso, soy sauce, purple persimmons, and white pears—all items that were high up on my wish list. In the end, I gratefully accepted her gift, convincing myself that it would be rude to turn her down. Right after we parted ways, I heard a server-wide announcement.

“It is now 5:00 p.m. on Day Seven of the event. The event ends in one hour.”

Whew, would you look at the time? It had been a fruitful event, not only in terms of the items I’d obtained but leveling up. Currently, my base level and job level were both at level 19, which meant I’d unlock the job change system the next time I leveled up. I’d be able to switch to a different job class once my base player level reached level 20, or level up to an upper job class once my Tamer level reached the same.

“I’ve only just leveled up, though, so it’ll probably be a while before I can level up again.”

Other than that, I'd also learned the joys of fishing and the existence of a new skill, Fermentation. I was glad I'd participated in this event, as I now had many more things to look forward to.

"Hmm, what now?"

After some thinking, I decided to pay one of the villagers one last visit, considering all they'd done for me.

"It is now 5:30 p.m. on Day Seven of the event. The event ends in thirty minutes."

Right after that announcement, I arrived at my destination.

"I'm back, Cayenne," I greeted the old man.

"Yuto, my boy. Welcome home."

I'm back. Welcome home. This was the last time I'd ever exchange words with Cayenne like this.

"I thought the travelers were getting ready to leave the village. Sure you ought to be here?"

"No worries, I'm all packed and ready to go. Besides, how could I leave without saying goodbye to you?"

"Ha ha. You sure know how to make an old man happy," he chuckled from his seat on the couch.

"Mm-mm."

I detected a hint of sadness in Olto's voice as he put his hand on Cayenne's knee and smiled up at him.

"Take care, Olto."

"Mm."

"Growl!"

"Chirp!"

"You too, Bear Bear and Rick."

Following Olto's lead, Bear Bear and Rick clung to Cayenne, looking reluctant to leave. As much as they enjoyed being patted on the head, the thought of saying goodbye to the old man seemed to sadden them. The same went for Sakura as well.

"...♪"

"My dear girl, Sakura. Thank you for everything."

Sakura gently patted the old man's cheek, like a grandchild showering her grandfather with affection. I sat on the sofa opposite Cayenne, chatting with him about nothing in particular. Our conversation might not have included any useful tips or information, but that was precisely what made it so enjoyable.

"It is now 5:59 p.m. on Day Seven of the event. The event ends in one minute."

I stood up and faced Cayenne, to whom my monsters were still clinging, and bowed deeply. Even though he was an NPC, I felt genuinely sad to part ways with him. That was how much I cherished our time together here.

"The event ends in ten seconds. Nine, eight..."

"Thank you for everything," I said, head bent.

"Mmm."

"..."

"Chirp."

"Growl."

My monsters copied me and bowed as well.

"Don't mention it. Thank you for protecting our village."

"Three, two..."

"Take care."

"You too, my boy."

"This is the end of the event."

Now that the event had come to an end, I'd assumed we'd be transported back to the Town of Beginnings. Instead, we found ourselves in a strange and unfamiliar place. Everything around us was pitch-black, as though we'd been flung into outer space, with numerous giant disks about one hundred meters in diameter suspended in midair. I soon realized that we were standing on one of those disks.

"Where are we...?"

"Mm?"

"Good, you're all here too. Thank goodness."

"...?"

Together, we observed our surroundings, puzzled by the sudden turn of events. The reason none of us were especially scared or panic-stricken was probably because we weren't the only ones here. I spotted dozens of familiar faces in the crowd, namely, the players who had been with us just moments ago. Evidently, all of the members of Server No. 29 had been gathered in one place. It wasn't just our server either; there were many more white disks nearby filled with people. There seemed to be as many disks as there were servers. *What's about to happen?* I wondered. Just then, a gigantic display suddenly materialized in the space around us, and a mob avatar appeared on-screen. The person very much resembled a male dating sim protagonist, their eyes hidden by bangs. The same image could be viewed on our status windows as well.

"We will now announce the results of the event. May I have your attention, please?"

"Whoa!"

Aha. So *that* was why we hadn't received a progress report on the final day. All traces of sadness had completely evaporated, and the vague melancholy I'd been dwelling in since bidding Cayenne farewell was now replaced by excitement. I was curious to know where we

stood after defeating Glasya-Labolas.

“We will begin with the results of the individual rankings.”

First up were the individual point rankings. I gazed at the screen with mild indifference as the top ten players of all thirty-three servers were displayed. This part didn’t concern me: even with the reward for defeating Glasya-Labolas, I’d only earned a total of 1,300 points, give or take. As a matter of fact, no one from our server had made it into the top ten. The camera zoomed in on the player who had won first place as they pumped both fists in victory.

“Still, how the hell do you earn *seven thousand* points on your own?”

As if to answer my question, the screen showed a list of events where the top ten players had earned the most points. Apparently, your server contribution didn’t count towards individual rankings; all that mattered was the strength of the bosses you defeated. According to the list, defeating the guardian beasts granted you a substantial amount of points. “Defeat the trees of evil” was another requirement that caught my eye. It seemed like if you failed to defeat Glasya-Labolas’s Apostles, the sacred trees would then transform into creatures called trees of evil. Since our server had defeated the apostles early on, we hadn’t encountered that particular boss. The list also included events that hadn’t taken place in our server, such as defeating the demons that had overrun the village and saving the children after the village had succumbed to Glasya-Labolas’s rule. From the looks of it, many servers had suffered significant collateral damage. Even though it wasn’t our server that had been affected, I couldn’t help feeling blue imagining the damage done to the village in the others.

“Growl.”

“Chirp.”

Bear Bear and Rick hugged me tightly from both sides, sensing the change in my mood. Their soft, fluffy embrace brought me instant comfort.

“Next, we will be moving on to the server rankings!” the emcee announced. *Finally, the moment we had all been waiting for.* All of the servers below sixth place were shown on-screen first. So far, so good—our server hadn’t been listed yet. Devastated cries and cheers of disbelief erupted around us. I could understand being upset about not ranking higher, but why did some of them sound *happy*? It soon became clear that one of the servers had managed to raise its rank significantly by winning the final boss battle. *No wonder.* I supposed I’d be just as ecstatic if our server had shot from thirtieth place all the way up to tenth place.

I waited with bated breath as the announcements continued. *Fifth*

place... Fourth place... Third place... Still no mention of our name. Finally, we were down to the last two.

“In second place, we have Server No. 7!”

Our name hadn't been called even once, which could only mean one thing...

“And finally, the winner is...Server No. 29!”

Phew, thank goodness. Although I'd been confident about winning, you never really knew until the results were announced. My server mates were beyond overjoyed. Everyone had sacrificed their individual ranks and worked towards raising our server rank instead, so they were no doubt relieved that our efforts had paid off.

“We did it, Silver-Haired!” Kokuten whooped.

“Hey, Kokuten! Gotta hand it to you combat troops.”

“Not at all. It's all thanks to *your* recipes, really.”

“Don't be silly...”

“Seriously, I mean it...”

“What are you two bowing to each other for?” Siegfried interrupted, rescuing us from the gratitude loop we'd gotten ourselves stuck in. Truth be told, we'd both been looking for a way out, but neither of us had been able to make the first move. Being modest to a fault and not knowing when to quit was one of the more annoying habits ingrained in Japanese culture.

“We won this thing together. This is *our* hard-earned victory!” Siegfried announced firmly.

“Yeah, you're right.”

“Absolutely.”

That was our Siegfried: the man always knew exactly what to say. I checked my status window, which listed the criteria the server rankings were based on. One of the key criteria that factored heavily into the points calculation was the guardian beasts' status at the end of the event. Some servers had failed to treat them or worse, accidentally killed them. Next was the state of the sacred trees. Only a handful of servers had successfully revived both trees; others had neglected them and allowed them to transform into trees of evil. The amount of damage the village had suffered was also a contributing factor, the scale ranging from fully intact to completely wrecked. Our server was the only one that had survived unscathed. Most villages had been half-ruined, followed closely by total annihilation.

“Next, we will be announcing the server contribution rankings.”

“Huh? That too?”

I hadn't expected them to announce that as well, given that our points hadn't been made public. I stared, mouth agape, as the rankings flashed on-screen one by one. Once we were down to the top three, Siegfried's name was called. Siegfried, who was in second place on our

server, was third place overall? Where did that put *me* then?

“The player who earned the most server contribution points is Yuto from Server No. 29!”

“Wow! Way to go, Silver-Haired!”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” I sputtered as my face filled up the screen. Although I tried to escape, I was immediately thronged by players congratulating me.

“C’mon, Silver-Haired, where’s your victory pose?!”

“Yeah. Go on, wave at the camera.”

I knew my teammates meant no harm, and it didn’t look like I could worm my way out of this. Seeing no other choice, I gave a halfhearted wave, and my monsters promptly followed suit. A chorus of cheers broke out from the other servers, embarrassing me to no end, although I figured most of them were directed at my monsters rather than me.

“Lastly, we would like to award titles to the following players. The top ten individual players will receive the title ‘The Lone Trooper,’ while the top ten server contributors will receive the title ‘The Compassionate Warrior.’ In addition, those who received an event-only title will receive a new title called ‘The Village Savior’ to replace their lost title.”

Huh? That must mean... Lo and behold, my event-only title was gone, replaced by two new titles, The Compassionate Warrior and The Village Savior.

“So what do those titles give you, Silver-Haired?”

“I wanna know too!”

Well, I guessed there was no harm in sharing since it was thanks to them that I’d managed to obtain these titles in the first place. Besides, I hadn’t intended on keeping them a secret anyway.

Title: The Compassionate Warrior

Effect: You have gained 20,000 G and four bonus points as proof of your valuable contribution to the event “The Village Archdemon.”

Title: The Village Savior

Effect: Increases friendship points when chatting with village NPCs. This title is proof of your valuable contribution to the event “The Village Archdemon.”

Even though one of my titles was nothing more than an honorable mention, people still envied me. I guessed that was to be expected, considering I’d obtained two titles at once. Additionally, I now possessed six titles in total, a fact that would no doubt become

another source of gossip. While I'd hoped to get a stronger title, the ones I'd received were more of a keepsake, so they weren't very powerful. Regardless, that didn't stop the other players from oohing and aahing over them. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to feel happy or sad about that.

"That concludes the awards ceremony. Thank you for your participation. We will now send you back to your original locations prior to the event. Points won during this event can be exchanged for special prizes. For more details, please refer to the item list."

The second the announcement ended, my vision went dark. The next instant, I was greeted by a familiar sight.

"This is our farm, right? Looks like we're back."

"Mm-mmm."

"Whoa, back to work *already*? You sure love farming, huh?"

"Growl growl!"

"Chirp!"

"...♪"

No sooner had we returned than my monsters sped off towards their stations. A full twenty-four hours had passed in-game by now, so understandably, we had to get back to work as soon as possible. Still, I admired their dedication, especially Olto's; he really seemed to be into it.

"Mm-mm!" He beamed, hoeing away merrily.

"Now then, what should *I* do in the meantime?"

Just as I was contemplating joining Olto, another window popped up before me.

"Let's see, what've we got here...? Individual event bonuses and a list of redeemable items?"

I had received 20,000 G and two bonus points each for our server rank and my server contribution rank, amounting to a grand total of 40,000 G and four bonus points. In addition, I'd also been awarded a travel permit to Alf for saving the village in one piece. Travel permits were a special pass that allowed the user to go to a specific location free of charge when using teleportation circles to travel between towns. Did this mean I'd be able to visit Alf again if I used one of those circles? I made a mental note to confirm the validity of the pass later. As for the other notification, it was essentially a list of items that I could exchange the event points I'd earned for.

"Mhm. Gotcha."

The list was split into two categories: prizes that could be redeemed with individual points and prizes that could be redeemed with server points. Server points were calculated based on your server rank and server contribution rank. I had gained a total of 10,500 points, but I couldn't tell if that was a large amount or not. Although

the devs had provided a detailed breakdown, there were far too many factors at play for me to grasp. To summarize, the key events that awarded the most points were the liberation of the two guardian beasts, the revival of the sacred trees, the rescue of the children, and the successful protection of the village.

It had occurred to me, during the announcements, that the event seemed to have been designed so that the players on servers with high-ranking individuals would fare badly as a group. That made sense, as defeating the guardian beasts meant there would be no reinforcements during the final boss battle. The fact that many of those servers had to deal with the trees of evil also meant that they hadn't succeeded in reviving the sacred trees.

"What's on the individual points list...? Wow. This weapon is strong AF. Costs 3,500 points, though."

The selection also included ironclad armor and skill scrolls, although they were all well beyond my reach.

"Isn't there anything I can use...? These are all for fighting..."

In the end, I chose a pair of earrings with an MP + 3 boost for three hundred points, and an iron ingot that I could use for incubator-making for eight hundred points. The remaining few points went towards a beginner's mana potion. That seemed about it for this category; I was more curious to see what the server points list had to offer.

"Interesting. Looks like they've got items for crafting and tents you can use as a party."

Evidently, prizes redeemable with individual points were mainly for combat; everything else fell into the server points category. I was relieved to see that I could choose almost every item on this list. The only items that were off-limits were ones that required a specific set of skills to use. The first thing that caught my eye was the prizes classified by skill type. Naturally, there were items for players who possessed Taming skills, such as food and weapons for your tamed monsters. Were there monsters that could wield swords or something? In any case, I had no need for them. After perusing the list some more, I found what I was looking for.

"Eggs and incubators, eh?"

I had a feeling I would find them. Unfortunately, there were no photos, and the items were listed by name only. Furthermore, the names were all in kanji, rendering them a little more mysterious than the usual phonetically labeled items. I was positive that the egg written with the characters for "nectar" and "bee" contained a Honey Bee inside. Similarly, "nectar" and "bear" likely referred to Honey Bears, and "chestnut" and "rat" to Squirrels. The descriptions were also purposely vague, consisting of one-liners such as "I love honey!"

and “Meet your furry woodland friend!” Were we supposed to enjoy the thrill of not knowing what we’d get until our egg hatched? The devs were highly mistaken if they thought I’d appreciate their playful attempt at humor.

Scrolling down further, I found several eggs that were far pricier than the others. In particular, the “Red Tiger” egg, “Wind Wolf” egg, and “Earth Dragon” egg required more points than the rest. The tiger and wolf eggs cost four thousand points, and the dragon egg five thousand points, respectively. I read the description for the Red Tiger egg, but all it said was “Fierce and fiery.” The Wind Wolf egg contained “A magical wolf with the ability to control wind,” and the Earth Dragon egg simply said “Child of the earth.” I hadn’t the faintest idea what any of that meant.

“Hmm, what should I do?” I pondered out loud. Given the number of points required, they had to be pretty powerful monsters.

“A tiger, a wolf, and a dragon...”

The dragon seemed by far the obvious choice! Wait, it *was* a dragon, right? Interestingly, the kanji they had chosen for this egg could also be interpreted as ‘mole,’ but, surely, the devs wouldn’t be charging five thousand points for a *rodent*?

“Does this have something to do with Glasya-Labolas?”

The archdemon’s apostles had each transformed into a dog and a cat, and Glasya-Labolas itself had transformed into a dragon. I mean, wolves *were* canines and tigers felines. Following that pattern, the Earth Dragon egg *had* to be a dragon. Come to think of it, there was no way an egg that cost more than a tiger or a wolf would be a bloody *mole*. While it was by no means the cheapest option, my heart was pretty much set on the Earth Dragon egg.

“Hmm. What else do we have...?”

Well, looky here! There were items for players with Farming skills too.

“Farm ownership for the Town of Beginnings, huh? Hey, there are seeds and saplings too!”

The list included purple persimmon saplings, white pear saplings, and seeds for white tomatoes, ultramarine eggplants, cabbage, and soybeans. Those were items that I definitely wanted. Saplings cost five hundred points apiece, while seeds were two hundred points each. That was 1,800 points altogether. Among the various plants was another mysterious and ultraexpensive item, namely, a sacred tree sapling, which cost a whopping six thousand points. Sure, I could see why it was so special, but did you really need one? If I remembered correctly, the sacred tree’s abilities were weakening demons and healing players within its vicinity. They weren’t exactly skills that came in handy on a farm, and I hadn’t heard any mention of it bearing

fruit either. Still, it was something that I could only obtain now and no doubt a premium item, even if its purpose was unclear. However, if I chose this sapling, I wouldn't have enough points for the Earth Dragon egg. Obviously, I wasn't willing to forsake my egg for a sapling. It looked like I'd simply have to give up on the sacred tree.

"What else should I get?"

The Earth Dragon egg cost five thousand points, and the seeds and saplings 1,800 points. That left me with 3,700 points. After poring over the list for several more minutes, I found something that piqued my interest.

"A book of secrets? Costs three thousand points."

The book of secrets appeared to be an item that let you choose a special profession when switching jobs. This particular book was made for Tamers and appeared to be for a secondary job, which meant I'd be able to use it soon. The item allowed you to upgrade to a Commander Tamer, increasing the maximum number of tamed monsters you could bring with you from five to six. The downside was that stat growth was slow, so it wasn't a huge improvement from your primary job class. Judging by the name, it sounded like you'd become a commandant of sorts. It was also likely that I'd be relying on my monsters even more than I already was.

"Hmm..."

Switching to this job class meant that I'd still be a wimp even if I leveled up. That was a bit of a bummer—I'd been hoping I'd become less of a noob the further I progressed in the game. Still, I was thrilled by the prospect of having more monsters accompany me on my adventures, in the sense that I'd have stronger reinforcements and get to be surrounded by even more adorable critters. That settled things, and I made up my mind to obtain the book of secrets. I wasn't sure if I'd come across this item again, and anyway, me being weak was nothing new. The more monsters I had to protect me, the better my chances of surviving.

I now had an Earth Dragon egg, purple persimmon and white pear saplings, white tomato, ultramarine eggplant, cabbage, and soybean seeds, plus the Tamer's book of secrets. That brought my total to 9,800 points, leaving me with seven hundred. If I wanted, I could spend another five hundred to purchase one plot of land in the Town of Beginnings. I'd been unable to expand my farm, having reached my limit a while ago; however, this bonus plot apparently didn't count. Even better, I was able to choose a spot next to the land I already owned, which I considered a terrific bargain. With the remaining two hundred points, I bought some night-night plant seeds, a plant that I hadn't come across yet. I had now used up all of my points.

"And done."

Once I finalized my purchase, the window glowed, and I received a notification that my prizes had been sent to me. I checked my inventory and found that all of my items had been safely stored away. Moreover, my new plot of land had also appeared beside my existing farm.

“Awesome. Looks like I can get planting right away.”

I decided to plant the stuff I’d just obtained on my new farm.

“Hey, Olto.”

“Mm?”

“These are the saplings and seeds I just got. We have pears, persimmons, tomatoes...”

While handing Olto my newly acquired items, I suddenly remembered something. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about it until now.

“That’s right, the Olive Treant!” I exclaimed, recalling the monster-slash-sapling I’d tamed during the event.

“Mm?”

“Not sure if it’s a monster or sapling, but...think we can plant it?”

It was hard to believe that this was once a monster. Even after assessing it, it was clear that it was nothing more than a plant.

“Mm-mm?”

“This is the thing I was talking about.”

“Mm!”

Olto thumped his chest reassuringly, ever the reliable farmer. Apparently, it was fine to plant it.

“Hey, reckon this Treant will grow into a monster?”

“Mm?”

“We can only bring it along with us if it’s able to walk.”

“Mmm?” Olto looked at me quizzically. All he knew was that we could grow it; *how* it would grow was a mystery to him as well. It looked like we’d simply have to wait for it to mature. In any event, I trusted Olto to take care of our farm. I was looking forward to the day we’d be able to harvest our pears and persimmons.

“All right, next up is the incubator.”

Considering how much the Earth Dragon egg had cost me, I refused to settle for any less than a first-rate incubator. Sawyer’s Crafting Skill Incubator with a special attribute seemed like the way to go. That being said, perhaps it was better to go with a Battle Skill Incubator instead since I’d gone to the trouble of obtaining a dragon.

“It ought to be fine in the barn. Might be more accurate to call it an incubating room at this point, though, with all the eggs we’ve been putting in there.”

With my mind made up, I decided to contact Sawyer first.

“Pleease be online.”

Thankfully, he appeared to be in the Town of Beginnings. To my surprise, I learned that he had participated in the same event—his server had ranked in sixth place. After our call, I stopped by the Magical Beasts Guild and bought a Battle Skill Incubator, before heading to his stall.

“Hey, Sawyer,” I greeted him upon arrival.

“Oh, hi, Yuto. Long time no see.”

“How’d the event go for you?”

Sawyer told me that although their server had succeeded in freeing the guardian beasts, one of the sacred trees had unfortunately transformed into a tree of evil. Furthermore, Glasya-Labolas had managed to penetrate the village’s defensive walls.

“So you actually managed to revive one of the sacred trees, then?”

“Yeah, we did, thanks to the chief.”

I had no idea that the head of the village was a Farmer with Arboriculture skills. According to Sawyer, several people on his server had brought the chief to the tree, where he promptly revived it. The apostle guarding the second sacred tree had proved too powerful, however, which was why they had failed to bring the chief with them. It made sense that alternative routes existed, though. The devs must have provided the village chief route in the event that there weren’t any players who possessed Arboriculture. In turn, I told Sawyer about what had happened on our server during the event and the points I’d earned.

“What? You mean you got more than *ten thousand* server points?”

“Yeah. How about you?”

“I only got 3,280 points; 2,400 for individual points. I exchanged them for a new alchemy tool.”

So I *had* received way more points than the average player. Well, I did come out on top after all. I figured it was best not to brag, though. Even though he probably already knew from the announcements, I didn’t want to provoke him unnecessarily.

Like last time, I handed Sawyer the incubator I bought, along with an iron ingot and wind crystal. At first, I thought of using an earth crystal, given that it was an Earth Dragon egg. I ended up reconsidering, though, deciding that it’d be more practical to give my new monster a wind attribute instead, as no one on my team had any wind-type skills as of yet. I wasn’t sure about the compatibility of wind and earth types, but surely they wouldn’t cancel each other out. At least, I *hoped* not. Once again, Sawyer offered to make my incubator free of charge. In exchange, I dried the weeds he had picked and made some herbal tea for him.

“Here you go,” he said after a while.

“Whoa! This is even better quality than the last one!”

“I would hope so, now that I have a new tool and my Alchemy skill has leveled up.”

Name: Battle Skill Incubator with Wind Attribute

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 7★

Effect: An incubator that grants a +5 initial stat boost at random to the monster that hatches from it. Also grants a random battle skill to its initial skill set, as well as a wind attribute skill and wind resistance.

The initial stat boost had increased from +4 to +5, an improvement from the Crafting Skill Incubator he had made for me last time. I was thrilled by the results and absolutely itching to put it to use. I thanked Sawyer, and raced back to my farm.

“I’m home.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Hey, this the Treant sapling I gave you?”

“Mm.”

When I returned to our farm, Olto had already finished the planting I asked him to do.

“Hmm. Looks like a regular plant.”

No matter how hard I scrutinized the sapling, I couldn’t make out any monster-like qualities in it. Regardless, the Olive Treant was clearly listed on my list of tamed monsters.

“Wonder what’s gonna happen to it?”

Is it gonna become a monster? A tree? Or maybe even a tree nymph, like Sakura?

“Oh well. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Mm!”

“Right, think I’ll go set up my new incubator.”

No point watching my farm all day—staring at the Treant wouldn’t make it grow any faster.

“Doubt Olto and Sakura’s egg is ready yet.”

Considering how long it had taken Bear Bear to hatch, I was totally unprepared for what I witnessed upon entering the barn.

“Holy shit, no way! It’s starting to crack *already*?!”

The egg had a crack running almost all the way around. Considering what I had seen with Bear Bear, it seemed to be on the verge of hatching. *Talk about a sudden turn of events.* There was no time to waste, though—I had to go inform the others, quickly!

“Olto! Sakura! Your egg’s about to hatch! Never mind work. Just hurry up and get over here stat!”

The two came rushing over shortly, looking incredibly flustered.

Rick and Bear Bear were with them too. Even though it wasn't their offspring, that didn't change the fact that this hatchling was soon to become part of our family.

"Mm-mm!"

"...!"

Olto and Sakura plonked themselves down in front of their egg, eyes shining expectantly, while Bear Bear and Rick peered over their shoulders. Judging by their jubilant smiles, they all seemed to be looking forward to the birth of their new family member. I, too, cast a glance at the egg every now and then as I busied myself with the Earth Dragon egg. Admittedly, the two oxygen capsule-esque incubators sitting side by side looked a little out of place in a fantasy RPG setting, but I still felt oddly moved by the sight. The fact that I could now incubate multiple eggs at the same time was proof that I'd matured as a Tamer. Just then, Sakura and Olto's egg glowed brightly, illuminating our faces.

"We've been through this before, so don't think you can surprise us this time! Ain't that right, bud?"

"Mm-mmm! Mm-mm!"

Nope, I was wrong. Olto looked like he was losing his mind.

"...!"

"Mmm..."

Sakura gently chided Olto, bringing him back to his senses. Thankfully, she seemed to have her wits about her. Women were usually more levelheaded than men in situations like these—the same rule evidently applied to NPCs as well.

"Mm."

"..."

Meanwhile, the light grew more and more intense.

"Any minute now, guys!"

"Mmm!"

"...♪"

The egg glowed one last time before hatching, shining far brighter than before. Although momentarily blinded by the light, I was prepared this time. Was our new companion a humanoid monster? A furry mammal? A boy, or a girl? *What's it gonna be?*

"H-Huh? This looks like..."

Online Forum [Farewell, Villagers]

A Discussion Thread for the Event “The Village Archdemon” Held on the 15th, Pt. 2

Note: A separate thread exists for the Martial Arts Tournament.
Bad-mouthing other people is a serious no-no!
Keep calm and carry on.

518: Marca

I saw the video of the event everyone's been talking about, and I totally get the hype now. It's action-packed, heart-warming, not to mention that scene in question was adorable! Obviously, I had to save it right away!

519: Mimura

Ditto! That scene packed a PUNCH. No doubt Silver-Haired's fans are gonna go gaga over it.

520: Murakage

Ahem, I believe you mean fans of Silver-Haired's *monsters*.

521: Marca

To tell the truth, I have a screenshot since I was on the same server as him. The official video is seriously something else, though. Those killer angles and 4K resolution totally made that scene ten times cuter. Betcha his monsters will have even more fans now.

522: Baa_Baa

Sorry to interrupt, but what do you mean by “official video?” How's it different from normal videos?

523: Mimura

Like the name implies, they're videos of events edited and released by the devs. So far, they've

uploaded two videos: one for the Martial Arts Tournament and one for the Village Archdemon event. BTW, I make a brief appearance too! You can catch a glimpse of me and several other players running for dear life after the demon takes over the village. Really wish they hadn't used that clip, ooph...

524: Baa_Baa

Can't you ask them to delete it?

525: Marca

No can do, unfortunately.

Most people seem to have skipped over it, but the TOS at the beginning explicitly states that the devs may use images and clips taken in-game for promotional content without players' express permission.

526: Mimura

Seriously, though, who the hell reads that stuff?

527: Baa_Baa

Watching the video now. You're right, it's pretty awesome.

Looks like they made a montage of all the servers.

528: Murakage

It's nice that they didn't just focus on the flashy battle scenes, but also included snippets of everyday life in the village and those majestic shots of the sacred trees.

529: Mimura

The scene where the guardian beasts come to the rescue hits you right in the feels.

I almost cried seeing the contrast between the villages overrun by demons and the ones that made it out relatively okay.

530: Marca

That's not the highlight of the show, though!

IMO, the scene at the 02:12 mark takes the cake!

531: Mimura

Ah, you're referring to *that* scene. Only if you're a fan of Silver-Haired's monsters. Still, I'll admit it's pretty cute.

The villagers' smiles at the end did it for me. I didn't expect to be moved to tears, TBH.

532: Baa_Baa

Eep! What *is* this?! That's the cutest salute I've ever seen! So *these* little cuties are the monsters everyone's been talking about?

533: Marca

That's right. His monsters wished us luck just before we left for battle. Excellent choice using that scene, devs!

534: Baa_Baa

One of my friends has been going on and on about wanting a gnome, but I now know why.

535: Marca

IKR? That being said, I don't recommend paying Silver-Haired a visit. Loads of players are keeping an eye on him and on each other. If someone were to go off on their own, they'd probably get reported for harassment.

536: Baa_Baa

N...No waaay

537: Mimura

It's no use. Forget it.

Gotta hand it to Server No. 29, though. I'm impressed they had zero collateral damage in their village.

Our server was the complete opposite—it was basically every man for himself. Obviously, we didn't stand a chance against the raid boss.

538: Marca

I reckon it's because Siegfried, Kokuten, and Silver-Haired all got along well and were able to bring everyone together.

539: Murakage

Alas, our village was partially destroyed.

The frontline warriors thoughtlessly defeated the guardian beasts, so naturally, we received no aid during the final battle...

I honestly felt a little bad for them, what with everyone chewing them out during results time.

540: Mimura

Our server didn't fare any better.

Worse still, we neglected the trees of evil; between

the boss and the demons we were overwhelmed.
Needless to say, our village was totally destroyed
sob

I only got 330 server points from all that. I did
get 4,820 individual points, though, so at the very
least I was able to snag a piece of rare equipment.
BTW, how many points did y'all get?

541: Baa_Baa

SP: 1,290 / IP: 4,320

542: Murakage

SP: 2,390 / IP: 3,600

543: Marca

SP: 7,010 / IP: 2,900

544: Murakage

Wouldn't expect any less from Server No. 29.

545: Marca

Well, we got Silver-Haired to thank for that. He's
the one who revived the sacred trees and discovered
how to free the guardian beasts, not to mention he
was the first player to become friends with the
villagers.

I'm so glad he found out how to lodge with NPCs and
shared that info with the rest of us.

Also, he was farming from Day One. Gotta admire the
guy's commitment.

Hearing about the lack of assistance from the
villagers on other servers really shows you just how
much Silver-Haired's ingenuity counted for.

546: Mimura

Whenever Silver-Haired does something out of the
ordinary, it usually bears incredible results.
If only he could fight, he'd be a top player for
sure.

547: Rokuro_Mochizuki

See, that's what confuses me.

548: Mimura

Whaddya mean?

549: Rokuro_Mochizuki

Even if he's a low-level Tamer who hasn't allocated
his stats properly, he can't be *that* weak. Surely,

he can fight to *some* extent. It's not as if his monsters are just for show, right?

550: Marca

Right, about that.

Silver-Haired wasn't too bad at fighting, actually. But because people ridiculed him and called him a noob at the start of the game, he seems to have developed some kind of inferiority complex.

As a matter of fact, he had no problem navigating areas with Zone Two-level mobs. I doubt he's as weak as he or many players assume he is.

551: Rokuro_Mochizuki

Gotcha. Think he'll join the front lines if he manages to get a strong monster with his points from the event?

I'm actually a fan of Sakura, but I hardly ever hear about her since my home base is in Zone Four *cries*

552: Baa_Baa

I think I've become a fan too after watching this video! The squirrel is especially cute!

As for me, my heart belongs to Zone Three. Can't imagine going back to the Town of Beginnings after coming this far...

553: Murakage

All the more reason to hope that his new bonuses will strengthen his stats. Given that he won first place in the server contribution rankings, he must have gotten a lot of points.

554: Mimura

Indeed. I sincerely hope he used them to obtain a super powerful monster egg.

555: Marca

Praying he didn't get the "Earth Dragon" egg, though.

547: Baa_Baa

Earth Dragon egg? Like, a dragon that harnesses the power of the earth? Sounds strong as heck!

557: Marca

Some Tamer posted a screenshot, saying they'd found it on the list of rewards.

However, people have been speculating that the egg

doesn't actually contain an "Earth Dragon," but a mole, their reasoning being that if it really was an elemental earth dragon, the devs would've used the kanji for "earth" instead of "dirt" to differentiate it from the reading for mole.

558: Mimura

The devs obviously did that to lead people astray. Please don't tell me Silver-Haired fell for it...

559: Marca

Nah, as if. Surely, he can't be *that* gullible?

560: Rokuro_Mochizuki

This is *Silver-Haired* we're talking about, though.

561: Marca

Dang, you're absolutely right!

562: Murakage

I can already see him stroking his new monster lovingly—a fluffy mole, that is. Not a dragon.

563: Baa_Baa

Don't fall for it, Silver-Haired! It's a trap!

564: Rokuro_Mochizuki

Please, for our sake too! I'm begging ya!

565: Mimura

Regardless, I feel like Silver-Haired would be able to work some kind of miracle, even if he did get a mole.

566: Marca

True enough!

567: Murakage

I wouldn't be surprised. That man is capable of a great many things.

568: Baa_Baa

The way y'all talk about him...

I'm not sure if I wanna meet him or not...

569: Mimura

Silver-Haired himself is a pretty average Tamer.

570: Rokuro_Mochizuki

And what exactly do you mean by "average"...?

Online Forum [Gather 'Round Tamers, Part 3] LJO Tamer Megathread

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

321: Ivan

Looks like most people have been using their event points to get eggs, myself included.

I chose the "Nectar Bear" egg, BTW. Finally, the Honey Bear I've long been waiting for!

322: Amelia

I got the Wind Wolf egg. Wonder what will hatch from it? Hehe

323: KingOysterMushroom

You guys could afford those? Lucky.

I went for an Armored Demonic Insect. There aren't many powerful insect-type monsters, but I'm hoping I'll get a tank.

324: Eulenspiegel

I chose the Honey Bear egg too.

Changing the subject, does anyone know about the new monster Silver-Haired supposedly got?

325: KingOysterMushroom

New monster, you say? Let's hear it.

326: Ursula

Sure it's not just an event reward?

327: Eulenspiegel

Thing is, while there were several eggs on the rewards list, there weren't any full-grown monsters.

328: Ursula

Maybe he tamed it *during* the event, then? I foolishly tamed an Olive Treant myself...

329: KingOysterMushroom

So you fell for the Olive Treant trap too, huh? Apparently, almost half of the Tamers who took part in the event tamed an Olive Treant during their stay, despite not owning a farm or Arboriculture skills. As a result, they've been at a loss about what to do with them.

330: Ivan

I already sold mine at the Magical Beasts Guild. I was hoping I'd get a cute tree nymph too. Woe is me *sigh*

331: Ursula

Debating whether I should sell mine as well...

332: Eulenspiegel

Well, it definitely wasn't a tree. From what I heard, his monster was a tiny fairy of sorts, but I don't recall encountering an enemy like that during the event.

333: KingOysterMushroom

Silver-Haired was on Server No. 29, though, i.e., the group that won the event. It's perfectly possible he encountered a monster we didn't.

334: Amelia

I was on the same server as him, but I don't remember seeing him with a monster like that during the results.

335: Ivan

Maybe he tamed it after he got back, then? Could be one of his eggs hatched too.

336: KingOysterMushroom

I heard Silver-Haired's good friends with the submaster of the Quick-Eared Cats. He might've sold that info to them, so why not go find out if you're curious?

337: Eulenspiegel

Guess I got no other choice. Can't believe he got *another* cute monster, though...

Ugh, jealous!

338: Amelia

Must be fate.

339: KingOysterMushroom

So it's his destiny to win the cute monster lottery?

340: Ivan

That's awfully specific.

341: Ursula

NGL, I'd kill for that kind of luck!

342: Eulenspiegel

Wish I could trade places with him. Sounds way better than bumping into people on the streets all the time.

343: Ivan

Hey, you never know—you might just bump into an attractive stranger one day.

344: Amelia

Sure that's 'bad luck'? Sounds like you're just not paying enough attention to your surroundings.

345: Eulenspiegel

Dammit, I want a cute girl monster too!

346: KingOysterMushroom

LMAO so *that's* what you're after

Online Forum [We Love to Cook] A Thread for All Things Cooking-Related

Together, we can promote the benefits of Cooking and make it a more popular skill. Anyone can become a top player right away!

Wanted: info about ingredients.

Don't forget to share your recipes!

Cooking fails are also welcome.

365: Asuka

So we can get the ingredients that we found in the village during the event?

366: Ishida

As a matter of fact, I visited the village after that. Same rule as the town in Zone Three applies—you can visit it by using the square's teleportation circles.

Unfortunately, it costs 3,000 G one-way, so it's not exactly cheap. Can't buy things in bulk either since there's a purchase limit.

367: Usami

Still, I'm glad we can get eggplants, tomatoes, persimmons, and pears now.

Think of all the new dishes we can make! We can even try out the new recipes we learned during the event!

368: Energie

LJO and cooking newbie here. My friend introduced me to this thread.

Pardon my intrusion, but what recipes are you talking about? Can I see them too?

369: Asuka

Welcome, newcomer! Together, we shall become the finest chefs LJO has ever borne witness to!

370: Ishida

We welcome you wholeheartedly! Care to join me in my quest of becoming a professional itamae chef?

371: Usami

I'll take good care of you, sweetie! Let's become supreme pastry chefs together!

372: Energie

Th-Thanks, everyone.

373: Asuka

Anyway, to answer your question.

The recipes we're referring to were discovered and refined during the event by Silver-Haired, a well-known player.

He's also incredibly generous. Not only did he share his recipes with his server mates, but he even gave them his permission to post them in the forums.

Thanks, Silver-Haired! You're the best!

374: Ishida

Not to mention those recipes were potent AF. We were all utterly shook.

We knew there'd be buffs, but still, we'd never seen anything like it.

375: Usami

It doesn't stop at that either. Silver-Haired's recipes also contained lots of valuable techniques that can be applied to other dishes, such as how to make powdered edible grass, fermented foods, and soup stock!

376: Asuka

Furthermore, Silver-Haired inspired us to share our recipes with one another. As a result, we've become closer as a group, and our collective repertoire has more than doubled.

377: Momma

Just got here. What's the tl;dr?

Also, good news. I can now make herbal tea leaves.

378: Usami

Congrats! Looks like herbal tea's becoming more widespread. Might be a good way to make money, seeing how it's still as popular as ever.

379: Momma

The taste is nowhere near Silver-Haired's level yet, but I'm gonna keep experimenting.

380: Ishida

Well, he *is* the one who discovered it in the first place. Doesn't surprise me in the least.
I've also been trying to whip up my own original blend.

381: Usami

Let's all do our best to surpass him! I'll keep trying too!
Just gotta level up my Alchemy skills now!

382: Asuka

It'd be nice if we could try each other's tea sometime. Think Silver-Haired will join us?

383: Energie

My friend let me try some of their herbal tea. It was delicious.
Did Silver-Haired share that recipe with everyone too?

384: Asuka

Something like that. One of Silver-Haired's acquaintances got his permission to post about it in the forums.
He was pretty quick to give up his recipe, even though he must have been making a lot of money off it.
That's Silver-Haired for you. His selflessness astounds me. We gotta learn from his example!

385: Usami

Could just be that he got fed up with having to make so much tea all the time lol

386: Ishida

Nah, couldn't be. He'd be an idiot to put an end to such a profitable venture for a reason like that.

387: Usami

Good point. Guess he's just a really charitable person then.

388: Energie

I had no idea there was such an amazing cook in this game. I'd love to become his apprentice.

389: Momma

Unfortunately, he's not a cook. That being said, I'm

not sure what to call him.

390: Asuka

A Tamer-slash-Farmer-slash-Cook?

391: Ishida

A multi-titleholder and pioneer of new information?
Betcha anything he got another title during this event.

392: Usami

A person who takes care of cute monsters?

393: Energie

I'm even more lost now.

394: Asuka

You'll get it eventually the more you play this game, whether you like it or not.

395: Ishida

Exactly. The only people who don't know about Silver-Haired are newbies or players who've been living under a rock.

Online Forum [Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired-Related, Pt. 4

This thread is for people who are interested in Silver-Haired, the slightly infamous player, and his monsters. Feel free to exchange information about them here.

Slander or abuse will not be tolerated.

Please treat sensitive information with care.

This thread may be deleted without warning anytime should we receive a complaint from Silver-Haired himself.

662: Yang Yang

Compiled a list of the various stunts Silver-Haired pulled during this event:

[*] Befriended the NPCs from Day One and found lodgings at one of their houses.

[*] Was the first to learn about the guardian beasts' role in the village. Immediately spread the word not to kill them.

[*] Discovered and defeated Glasya-Labolás's Apostle.

[*] Revived the sacred trees without the chief's help.

[*] Created dishes with special buffs and shared those recipes for free with his server mates.

[*] Boosted players' morale with his monsters' legendary salute.

Does that sound about right?

663: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Business as usual, eh?

664: visitorfromanotherplanet

Also, it seems like the NPCs on their server were quicker to lend a hand, thanks to Silver-Haired raising his favorability score with them.

665: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Yeah, pretty sure that had something to do with it. Reckon the other players also improved their behavior due to Silver-Haired and Siegfried's influence, which resulted in the villagers warming towards them.

From what I heard, the players on the worst-performing server were totally ignored by the villagers. In the end, the NPCs left without a word and escaped without the players.

666: Willow

Look at that, I'm the Antichrist!

Also, I come bearing news of Silver-Haired!

667: Yang Yang

Well, let's hear it then.

668: Willow

Silver-Haired got a fairy.

669: visitorfromanotherplanet

Say what? A *fairy*? Whaddya mean?

670: Willow

I just told you. He had a new fairylike monster with him. It didn't have any wings, but it was clearly a fairy in every other aspect.

671: Yodel-Ay-Hee

What's its name? Species? Details, please.

672: Willow

Sorry, that's all I've got. Like c'mon, we're talking about *Silver-Haired* here. An average player like me, talk to him? I ain't got the guts to do so.

673: visitorfromanotherplanet

I feel ya. I'm a silent observer myself. I could never just strike up a conversation with someone *that* famous.

674: Yang Yang

Doubt Silver-Haired considers himself a celebrity, although I definitely get what you mean.

675: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Still, a fairy, huh... No doubt people are gonna go nuts again.

676: visitorfromanotherplanet

Imagine starting up a fresh bout of drama right

after the event... That's our Silver-Haired!

677: Willow

He truly is a wonderboy.

Epilogue

Once the light subsided, both incubator and broken eggshells disintegrated into glowing particles, before vanishing into thin air, similar to when Bear Bear hatched. In place was our newest addition to the family.

“Wow, what a cutie!”

The words were out of my mouth before I knew it. Who could blame me, though?

“Aye.”

A tiny girl stood before us. By that, I don’t mean a *young* girl, but a palm-sized, Tinker Bell-esque fairy. The only difference was that she lacked wings. The tiny fairy had red, mid-back length hair that was soft and curly in texture, with long pointy ears like an elf. Her facial features were refined and breathtakingly beautiful. Her outfit consisted of a matching blue short-sleeved crop top and shorts, as well as a brown, poncho-type cape. It sort of resembled traditional Andean clothing to me. Although she looked like a doll, her radiant smile was proof that she was very much alive. Shortly, I heard an announcement instructing me to name her. Evidently, you weren’t always guaranteed a unique monster, even if its parents were both unique specimens.

“Hmm, a name, huh...?”

“Aye?”

“I wanna take a closer look at you. Could you come over here?”

“Aye.”

I extended my palm towards her, and she obliged by jumping onto it. Now that I was seeing her up close, she seemed even cuter.

“What should I name you?”

“Aye?”

Even the way she tilted her head was adorable.

“Name, name... What to name a fairy?”

Well, if we’re talking red-haired fairies...

“Got it! I hereby name you Fau!”

“Aye.”

Name: Fau / Race: Pixie / Base Level: Lv. 1

Master: Yuto

HP: 15/15 / MP: 25/25

Strength: 4 / Endurance: 4 / Agility: 10

Dexterity: 12 / Intelligence: 9 / Sanity: 8
Skills: Musical Performance, Heal, Conceal, Singing,
Eavesdrop, Gather, Jump, Fire Resistance, Fire
Summoning, Night Vision, Alchemy
Equipment: Fairy Lute, Fairy Clothes

Instead of a weapon, she appeared to be equipped with an instrument. Moreover, her skills included musical performance and singing. Could her fighting style be similar to a bard's? If I remembered correctly, bards were capable of providing buffs or debuffs with their performances. While they weren't able to take part in the fighting, the effects they provided more than made up for it. If Fau was anything like a bard, I could most likely expect great things from her. Additionally, she possessed healing skills. *Never underestimate someone just because they're tiny.*

"What kinda ability is 'Fire Summoning?'"

Judging by the sound of it, I suspected it was a skill that enabled her to summon a fire-type familiar of sorts. In response, Fau gave me a demonstration.

"Aye aye aye!"

With one wave of her hand, Fau produced a ball of fire resembling a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Aye!"

At her command, the ball of fire glided smoothly through the air. She appeared to have full control over its movements. Now, this was an interesting ability. It also had nice compatibility with the rest of her skills, as she'd be able to launch attacks even while performing. Furthermore, she had also obtained Alchemy, thanks to the Crafting Skill Incubator I had used. I was ecstatic that I now had an assistant to aid me with my crafting experiments. Once again, I'd won the monster lottery!

"Pleased to meet you, Fau!"

"Aye!"

"Mm-mm! Mm-mm!"

"Growl! Grooowl!"

"Chirp chirp! Chirp chirp!"

My companions began doing a strange dance around Fau and I, apparently to celebrate her arrival. Perhaps they'd developed a taste for dancing after the Bon dancing in the village. As usual, Rick's movements were all over the place. Seeing them dance, Fau perched on my shoulder and began plucking the strings of her lute, strumming a cheerful tune. It sounded like something you'd hear in a packed tavern. She then opened her mouth and started to sing. Though she wasn't capable of speech, singing seemed to pose no problem for her.

The air was soon filled with melody. Thrilled, my monsters' movements became more energetic, all of them jumping up and down vigorously. Sakura swayed her hips next to me, clapping along to the beat.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

“...♪”

“La la la la...♪”

“Hey, no fair. I want in.”

Things were about to get even livelier around here—not that I minded. *The more, the merrier.*

A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

A
LATE-
START

TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

3





**"Wonder
what kind of fish
I'll catch?"**

"Mm-mm?"

"...?"

Olto and Sakura
stared at me curiously.

Apparently the
concept of fishing
was foreign to them.

Rick and Bear Bear
chased each other in
the meanwhile,
keeping an eye on
our surroundings.

Since Rabbits were
the only monsters we
had to be wary of in
these parts, I figured
those two would
suffice for guard duty.

Bonus Short Stories

The Residents of Yuta Sasaki's Town

“Wonder if I can get it at that convenience store?”

Hey there. I'm Yuta Sasaki, a twenty-five-year-old who's decided to take advantage of my company's summer vacation and paid leave to hole up in my room playing the latest VR game in full-on junkie mode. Did someone call me a loser? I'm fully aware of that, thank you very much. Can't help it, though; I'm a total sucker for video games. Like, come on, this is the latest VR game we're talking about—one that makes you feel like you've actually entered a fantasy world. How can I not play it?!

Hence, I had fully intended to play games all day long in my air-conditioned room, away from the sweltering summer heat. At least, that had been the plan...

“Well, can't do anything if they're down for maintenance.”

I was currently unable to log in to the game thanks to a bug that'd been found in the system. According to the notice I received, all services would be temporarily unavailable for about two real-world hours. Although I was a bit bummed, it was just as well that I couldn't play now, as I'd actually used up my last roll of toilet paper. Since I usually bought them in bulk, I'd failed to notice I was running low. Turns out my foolproof plan to stay indoors all summer wasn't as foolproof as I thought...

“Damn, it's hot out here...”

I begrudgingly left my hermit hut and trudged past the twilight rows of houses, making my way to the nearest convenience store. The air was hot and stuffy, as though I had stepped into a sauna. Within minutes, I was sweating profusely, all the more so because I'd had the AC in my room on full blast. Both my t-shirt and shorts were soaked through, sweat dripping out of my every pore. And to think it had been even hotter during the day. *Unbelievable.*

“Feel like I'm gonna melt... As soon as I get some toilet paper, I'm heading straight home,” I panted. If it hadn't been for the maintenance, I'd be having an early dinner at home about now.

“Maybe I should've just bought a pack online.”

Nah, bad idea. Even with expedited shipping, the earliest delivery date was the next day, and I couldn't very well go without using the bathroom for *that* long. Going out to buy a pack in-store seemed like a far better use of my downtime.

“Maintenance oughta be done in about an hour.”

I figured I might as well eat out, seeing as I’d gone through the trouble of leaving my house. I hadn’t been to the ramen shop near the station in a while. Although the place was best-known for its eating challenges, the food was nothing to shrug at either. The restaurant next door that served fusion cuisine sounded pretty good, too; the chef was around the same age as me, and we shared similar hobbies. *Or should I go to the soba shop down the alley?* A refreshing set of cold soba noodles would probably be perfect in steaming weather like this. Actually, curry worked just as well. After all, curry counted as a drink, not to mention spicy food was surprisingly effective at cooling you down on a hot summer’s day.

“Eh, I can think about it on my way there.”

Regardless of which restaurant I chose, I still had ample time for a quick dinner. I could decide what I was in the mood for once I arrived at the station. The *real* issue was having to walk all the way there in this heat. Frankly, just thinking about it made me lose my appetite.

“Should I just settle for some convenience store bento? Hmm, but...”

As I weighed my options, I spotted a pair of office workers in suits waiting at a pedestrian crossing. They appeared to be in the middle of making out of office rounds. Now that I thought about it, the whole thing was ridiculous, even though I was usually dressed the same way doing the same thing. Walking in this heat in *that* getup was nothing short of torture.

“...Wait, isn’t that...?”

I’d unwittingly stared at the man, who seemed oddly familiar. The more I looked at him, the more he reminded me of one of our clients from the sales department.

“Do you *have* to smoke outside too, Ms. Matsumoto? You know I don’t like cigarettes,” the man whined.

“Quit nagging, Shibata. It’s not even lit, don’t get yet panties in a knot,” the woman replied biting. I was right—the man was indeed Mr. Shibata from Company A. I hadn’t expected to bump into him near my house of all places.

“...Better hide.”

I quickly hid behind a lamppost just before the crosswalk, having absolutely no desire to meet a client while on vacation.

“Speaking of, Ms. Matsumoto, who was that gorgeous girl with you the other day? You know, the one you were with last Sunday.”

“Dude, were you watching us? Friggin’ scuzzball.”

“S-Scuzzball...? You’ve got it all wrong. I just happened to see you in passing.”

“Whatever, she’s a friend of mine. Don’t think I’ll let a no-hoper

like you get with my precious Ami, though. Besides, her social anxiety makes it difficult for her to talk to people she's not close with."

Was this tomboyish woman with a cigarette in her mouth Mr. Shibata's superior?

"By the way, I heard that our agent, Mr. Sasaki, used his paid leave to get an extra-long summer break."

"Really? I'm jealous. Maybe I'll take a month off too so I can play games to my heart's content."

"Please don't, I'm begging you! We'll end up working ourselves to death!"

"Just kidding. Relax, I ain't gonna do anything of the sort—for now, at least."

"P-Please, promise me you'll never, EVER do anything like that!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

D-Dang. I hadn't expected to become a topic of discussion. I almost gasped when they mentioned my name. Still, hearing them gossip about me gave me a weird sense of superiority, probably because I didn't detect any disdain in their tone of voice. If anything, they seemed envious of me. I already knew Mr. Shibata was a gamer; from the sound of it, the woman named Matsumoto was one as well. I continued to walk a few paces behind them, head bent in case Mr. Shibata were to turn around and notice me. Don't get the wrong idea; I wasn't trying to stalk them or anything. We just happened to be headed in the same direction, that's all!

I had to say, though, they seemed really close. *Wish I could have a carefree conversation with an attractive woman at my workplace too. Speaking of which, the women in my department are terrify—*

"Huh? Well, that was quick."

Before long, I had arrived at my destination. The duo was nowhere to be seen. *Time to stop complaining about my job and hurry up and get what I came for.*

"Man, that feels great."

The store's AC was a godsend, restoring my half-depleted HP to full. I'd managed to cool off, both literally and figuratively, so I wouldn't have to worry about collapsing on the way home.

"Ahhh... Now this is living."

Air conditioners had to be one of the greatest inventions of all time. I spread my arms wide, absorbing the cool air with my entire body, and felt my sweat evaporate almost instantly. However, in my overly relaxed state, I had totally forgotten that I was at a convenience store.

"Um, do you mind moving a bit?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

I hadn't realized I was blocking the aisle until a high schooler

paused in front of me and pointed out my oversight. I quickly stepped aside, and the girl and her friend slipped past, chuckling. *Yikes. Nothing more mortifying than getting laughed at by cute girls.* Both girls were incredibly pretty: one petite and sprightly, the other tall and charming with long hair that hid her eyes.

“Phew. Now that I’ve cooled down, let’s go get some toilet pa—”
“Eep!”

In my haste, I had bumped into yet *another* high school girl. Thankfully, I hadn’t knocked her over, but she did lose her balance and wobble a bit.

“S-Sorry! You okay?” I hurriedly apologized.

“Oh yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention either,” the girl answered just as apologetically. It looked like I wouldn’t have to worry about being accused of groping or paying any hospital fees. *Crisis averted.* I couldn’t help noticing she was also extremely cute. Her sleek black hair was trimmed in a shoulder-length bob, her navy blue sailor uniform perfectly pressed. Overall, she had a clean and studious look to her—a quintessential “class president” type.

“Ririko, Kurumi, wait up!”

Giving me a slight bow, the girl ran after her friends, who were also dressed in the same uniform as her. Damn, how could I be so absentminded?! Was it because I’d stayed logged in to LJO for too long? Had that caused me to lose my ability to navigate the intricacies of the real world? Nah, it was probably just the heat.

“Whoops. Better hurry up. It’s not like I’ve got all day.”

Not only did I have to buy toilet paper, but I also had to figure out what to do for dinner. *To eat out or make do with convenience store bento—that is the question.*

“...All right. Since I’ve come all the way here, I might as well eat out!”

That’s settled then. Nothing like spicy food on a hot day! I made up my mind to go to the curry shop near the station, ready to demolish the spiciest item on their menu. Unfortunately, my plans were soon thwarted.

“Can’t believe this store doesn’t have toilet paper...”

I hadn’t considered that possibility. All they had were pocket tissues. At first, I thought of throwing in the towel and just going home, but it seemed a shame to leave empty-handed after coming this far. Even the picture of my beloved dog Fran that I’d set as my lock screen, seemed to be telling me not to give up. Sighing, I decided to search for the nearest shop on my phone.

“If I can find a supermarket or drugstore... Hey, this one’s pretty close by. Looks like it’s just past the sports park.”

To my relief, there seemed to be a supermarket about five minutes

away.

“Let’s see. Go straight and turn right at the corner of Hidenami Books, then turn left at Arkham, the New England restaurant...” I muttered, following the directions on the map. “Go straight down this path...”

I didn’t recall ever being in this area. Guess there were still places I hadn’t explored yet near my house.

“Should be opposite of the steak house Celaeno... Aha! Found it!”

While the place wasn’t very big, there was no doubt it was the supermarket I’d been looking for. I’d never noticed it before now, the store being situated within a secluded residential area.

“All right! Mission accomplished!”

I grabbed a pack of toilet paper from the discount display outside and headed into the store. Given that it was evening, the supermarket was pretty crowded.

“Should I buy something for dinner too?” I wondered. That being said, did I still have time to eat? I wasn’t sure I had time to even sit down for a proper meal, let alone go to the ramen shop near the station. Maintenance was scheduled to end in about thirty minutes. That would leave me with ten minutes to get home and twenty minutes to eat...

“Damn, the checkout line’s busy as hell, though.”

Judging by the number of people, it could take ten minutes just to pay for my stuff.

“Hang on. How ’bout I buy some onigiri and eat them on the way home?”

Granted, it wouldn’t be the most satisfying of meals, but gaming came before all else. If I could eat while on the move, I ought to have a bit of time to spare once I returned.

“Yep, let’s go with that.”

All that was left now was to choose which onigiri to buy.

“Hmm, what should I get?”

This supermarket appeared to offer a wide variety of ready-made foods, and their onigiri was no exception. Including the standard fillings such as grilled salmon, dried bonito flakes, pickled plum, and tuna mayo, there were over twenty types of onigiri available.

“Think I’ll splurge a little.”

I’d braved the heat and come all the way here; surely, a bit of extravagance wouldn’t hurt. After some deliberation, I chose two types of onigiri that were slightly more expensive than the others—salmon and salted fish roe, and Wagyu and Okinawan-style braised pork belly mixed rice—before heading to the checkout lane. When I arrived, I saw an unusually dreary group of people standing in line. Even from behind, I could tell that they were utterly burnt out; that

was how palpable their exhaustion was.

“Chief... Sure you ought to be buying this much alcohol? What if the deputy chief finds out?”

“Shut up. How can I *not* drink?! Here I thought I could finally go home today...”

“It is what it is, Chief. Maintenance set us back pretty hard.”

“Damn it... Just when I thought we had things perfectly balanced...”

“We hadn’t anticipated you-know-what would be discovered so soon. Gotta make a few readjustments, hit some bug fixes.”

“Then we have to prepare for the event once we’re done with the update...”

“Guess we’ll have to pull another all-nighter.”

“Ugh, I don’t wanna go back to work. Maybe I’ll just go home.”

“You can’t, Chief! The deputy chief will kill you!”

I could only catch bits of their conversation, but they seemed to be software engineers. From what I gathered, they had to go back to work after this. It sounded like a pretty serious problem had cropped up. *My condolences, fellow office workers*. After ten minutes of standing in line listening to the engineers(?) grumble about their job, I finally managed to pay for my items. Before heading home, however, I spent a few moments outside the supermarket mentally mapping out my return route.

“Gotta get home ASAP. Which would be the quickest way to go?”

I figured I’d make it back in time for the relaunch if I took the shortest path home. After five minutes of walking and munching, however, I passed by the video game store I frequented on a regular basis.

“Well, well, what do we have here?”

I couldn’t help peering inside the cart outside the store. A gamer to the core, it was practically in my nature to do so. While I might not give off the impression, I’m also a fan of retro games. Occasionally, I even buy and play games that came out before I was born. My gamer’s sixth sense told me there was something in that cart, as this was precisely the kind of place where you were bound to find hidden gems.

“Wait, I know this game...”

The cart was packed with disks of an MMORPG that came out when VR games first became a thing. Although the game’s servers had long since gone dark, the disk included an offline mode that allowed for solo play. Therefore, I *could* play it if I wanted to, but...

“Wow, that’s cheap. Still wouldn’t wanna play it, though.”

This game was incredibly notorious due to a player dying as a result of staying logged in for too long. In fact, it was the very game

that prompted mandatory login time limits and forced logouts for future VR games. There were many other titles steeped in problematic history, including a VR game that had such realistic battle scenes it was recalled from the shelves, as well as a major RPG that had such terrible graphics that players outright boycotted it.

“Shit, this isn’t the time to go scavenging for games!”

Phew, that was close. *Gotta hand it to game stores though—they never fail to entice me.*

“Even if I did buy something, it’s not like I’d have any time to play it.”

For now, all of my energy was fully devoted to LJO. With great difficulty, I turned my back on the cart and hurried on.

“...It’s so hot...”

Now that I’d come back down to earth, the scorching heat that I’d momentarily forgotten while rummaging through the cart hit me like a blast. Strangely, the more aware I was of the heat, the hotter I felt. Thankfully, I didn’t have far to go. All I had to do was continue straight and cross at the next traffic light, and I would be home in no time. Soon, I would be free from this burning hellhole, safe within the cool refuge of the air-conditioned paradise that was my room. The first thing I planned to do when I got home was to quench my thirst with some ice-cold water. Then, I’d take a hot shower to rinse off my sweat before cooling down in front of the AC. The thought of that made me quicken my pace instinctively. Were the passersby on the streets also walking quickly for the same reason? Just then, I overheard the exchange between the couple in front of me.

“Hurry up, Takagi! Maintenance is ending soon!”

“Relax, Arisa, no need to fret so much. Even if we get back early we’ll still have to wait to log in.”

“Nya ha ha. You’re right, sorry. Just can’t help being impatient.”

“Anyway, let’s decide where to meet up.”

Did I hear them mention the words ‘maintenance’ and ‘log in’? Could they be playing the same game as me? *Ha ha. Nah, couldn’t be.* Japan was huge, and LJO was far from the only VR game out there. That would be too much of a coincidence. If they really were LJO players, though, were they playing as a couple? I knew it was petty of me to assume every young woman and man spending time together must be a couple, but...if they *were* a couple, I was beyond jealous—as if. It was disgraceful, *scandalous* even, I tell you! Gamer couples were nothing but a nuisance, the way they acted all lovey-dovey in public without any consideration for others. *If you wanna make out, do it offline, you hear me?!*

“...?”

My eyes met with the woman, who gave me a quizzical look.

Crap! H-Had I been talking out loud?

“...?”

The woman looked at me fleetingly before returning to her conversation with her partner. Man, that was close. Apparently, she had simply sensed me staring at them and turned around. Come to think of it, though, wasn't that even worse? This was clearly suspicious behavior. As a matter of fact, I was acting like an unhinged lunatic, the way I was stalking the couple out of jealousy. Honestly speaking, I'd probably been a weirdo on more occasions than not today. I blamed the weather; I'd be able to think more clearly if only it hadn't been so hot. Unable to endure the awkwardness a second longer, I hastily made my exit, inadvertently taking the long way home.

“...I'm pooped.”

Seriously, what was I doing?

“That girl seemed kinda familiar, though...”

Had I met her somewhere? I had a feeling I'd seen her before...

“Ha ha, as if. Must be my imagination.”

I supposed this was what people referred to as déjà vu. After all, there was no way I'd forget a pretty face like hers.

“Shit, I only have ten minutes left! Better hurry home!”

Soon enough, I had escaped the summer heat, healed once more by the presence of my monsters.

From the Devs' Point of View

“Hey, Chief.”

“What's up?”

“...Take a look at this.”

“Oh ho, fascinating stuff. You mean the players have already managed to raise their favorability score with the villagers *this* much? And this early into the event! Which server is this?”

“Number 29, sir.”

“Do you know why?”

“One moment, please... Ah, it's because of Cayenne, one of the NPCs.”

“If my memory serves me correctly, he's a Farmer, right? Didn't he also have an advisory role?”

“Correct. Also, advisors' points are worth more. Befriending Cayenne will result in a significant boost in the villagers' overall favorability score.”

“How'd they manage it in such a short space of time, though?”

“From the looks of it, one of the players has been helping out on Cayenne's farm for free.”

“For *free*? Ah, I see. So they accepted an unofficial request from the old man.”

“Apparently, he saw Cayenne struggling and offered to help him out of pure good will. He’s been staying at the old man’s place ever since.”

“What? It’s only Day One, and you’re telling me this guy’s *already* found lodgings that weren’t the inn?”

“Well, players who possess a similar skill set do get extra favorability points. No doubt they also hit it off with each other.”

“So that’s how he managed to achieve this favorability score. What’s this player like? Wait, don’t tell me. You mentioned *farming*, right? Is it who I think it is?”

“You got it, Chief. It’s your favorite Tamer, the one who’s been rising to fame recently with the moniker ‘Silver-Haired.’”

“Gone and done it again, eh?”

“It would seem so.”

“I *knew* it! I just *knew* this guy would do something big! Things are getting real interesting now!”

“I’m actually getting nervous about how this event’s gonna turn out...”

“Bah ha ha ha! Did you see that?! He’s already revived one of the sacred trees! What a mad lad!”

“Seriously? That isn’t something you can achieve with Arboriculture alone, you know? You need to hit two—no, at least *three* flags for it to work.”

“The villagers’ favorability score’s pretty high too, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. At the moment, Server No. 29 is in third place. That being said, the servers in first and second place are mainly earning points by defeating the giant beasts that dwell in the forest, so it’s only a matter of time before they plateau. I believe it’s safe to say that Server 29 is the de facto champion—most of their boost in rank has come from increasing their overall favorability score.”

“True. Can’t unlock the upper limits without interacting with the villagers to a certain extent.”

“Looks like Silver-Haired isn’t the only one who’s been taking on regular quests.”

“That so? Wow, Server No. 29 has completed nearly twice as many labor quests as the other servers!”

“The other players seem to have taken a leaf out of Silver-Haired’s book. They’re probably also doing it in hopes of finding better lodgings.”

“Heh heh heh. Don’t you just love it when players act the way you want them to?”

“I’ll admit it’s a relief, considering he always does the unexpected.”

“Reckon this server will win then?”

“Who knows? In terms of the average player level, they’re closer to the bottom than the top. I’d say it all comes down to whether they can survive the final boss battle.”

“They’ve freed the bear, though, haven’t they? Still, it might be too much to expect them to hit the boar and ally flags.”

“Not sure if that’ll be enough, to be honest.”

“Well, well, the plot thickens! I really hope they show those meatheads that this game is so much more than just fighting. I’m rooting for you, Silver-Haired!”

“As developers, we really shouldn’t play favorites, Chief.”

“Wow... They really made it out with zero collateral damage. I know we prepared for that scenario, but I never thought they’d actually pull it off...”

“Seriously, what is up with this guy? The bear, the boar, the allies—he managed to unlock all three of them. Moreover, the village’s favorability score had to be maxed out for Clans and Cacal to step in to help at that stage.”

“Hmm... I would say the knight also played a huge role. After all, he seems to have interacted with more than thirty villagers. Highly doubt any other player has befriended that many NPCs.”

“We shouldn’t have assigned those two to the same server.”

“No point stressing over that. The server allocation was done at random.”

“Think Silver-Haired has the ability to derail cause and effect? He might secretly be a hero from another world with super cheat powers.”

“You’ve been reading too many light novels.”

“One thing’s for sure, though—he has more than just luck on his side.”

“Anyway, we better monitor him carefully in case people start spreading rumors about cheating and whatnot.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If you take a look at the forums, you’ll see that even if he does something out of left field, players have taken to simply shrugging it off as ‘That’s our Silver-Haired.’”

“...Even the players feel the same way as us, huh?”

“Seems like it.”







Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter One: Let the Event Begin!

Chapter Two: The Villagers of Alf

Chapter Three: A Change in the Guardian Beast

Chapter Four: The Demon in the Trees

Chapter Five: The Archdemon Glasya-Labolas

Chapter Six: Reinforcements and a Fight to the Death

Chapter Seven: The End of the Event and Its Aftermath

Epilogue

Color Illustrations

Bonus Short Stories

Bonus Textless Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



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by Yuu Tanaka

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